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DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

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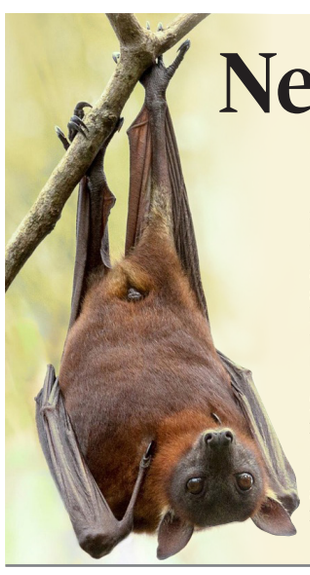

New bat virus may infect humans like Covid-19: Virologists

BEIJING, 22 FEB

A Chinese team of virologists have found a new bat coronavirus that carries the risk of animal-to-human transmission because it uses the same human receptor as the virus that causes Covid-19, a media report said.

The study was led by Shi Zhengli, Chinese virologist from the controversial Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV), where the Covid-19 was alleged to have emanated from.

Shi, who is known as the Bat Woman for her research on viruses from the Bats, as well as the Chinese government deny that the virus was leaked from the Wuhan lab.

The latest discovery is a new lineage of the HKU5 coronavirus first identified in the Japanese pipistrelle bat in Hong Kong.

The new virus comes from the merbecovirus subgenus, which also includes the virus that causes Middle East respiratory syndrome (Mers), the Hong Kong based South China Morning Post reported.

- The researchers found that when the virus was isolated from bat samples it could infect human cells as well as artificially grown masses of cell or tissue

The virus is able to bind to the human angiotensin converting enzyme (ACE2), the same receptor used by the Sars-CoV-2 virus, which causes Covid-19, to infect cells.

The researchers found that when the virus was isolated from bat samples it could infect human cells as well as artificially grown masses of cell or tissue that resembled miniaturised respiratory or intestinal organs.

Earlier this month, China said its bio-lab in Wuhan which faced allegations leaking the Covid-19 causing the global pandemic has never engaged in "gain-of-function studies" on coronavirus amid allegations that USAID has funded the study of the infectious disease.

Trump has shut down the USAID work that was not aligned with American strategic interests and wastes money.

Guo said at a media briefing on February 12 here that "It is 'extremely unlikely' that the Covid-19 pandemic was caused by a lab leak — this is the authoritative conclusion reached by the experts of the WHO-China joint mission based on science following their field trips to the lab in Wuhan and in-depth communication with researchers". *—PTI*

Rushdie attacker found guilty of attempted murder

NEW YORK, 22 FEB

Hadi Matar, the man who stabbed and partially blinded prize-winning novelist Salman Rushdie at an event in New York, has been found guilty of attempted murder. Jurors delivered the verdict on Friday for Matar's assault on Rushdie on stage at an arts institute's event in August 2022. The Satanic Verses author, 77, was stabbed with a knife multiple times in the head, neck, torso and left hand, blinding his right eye and damaging his liver and intestines, and requiring emergency surgery and recovery. *—Agencies*

>>>More on Page 6

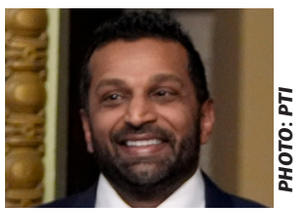

PHOTO: PTI

Kash Patel takes oath as FBI director on Bhagavad Gita

WASHINGTON DC, 22 FEB

Kash Patel took oath as the ninth director of the FBI on the Bhagavad Gita and spoke about how a first-generation Indian kid is living the American dream, reflecting on his heritage. The US Senate voted 51 to 49 to confirm Patel on Thursday. Patel's family members and girlfriend were present during the oath ceremony. The oath ceremony was administered by US Attorney General Pam Bondi in the Indian Treaty Room in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building (EEOB) on the White House campus. She asked Patel to place his hand on the Gita and raise his right hand to take the oath. *—PTI*

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1st session of Delhi Assembly to begin on Monday

NEW DELHI, 22 FEB

The first session of the eighth Legislative Assembly of Delhi will begin on Monday with newly elected members taking oath at 11.00am, said a bulletin issued by the House secretariat. The three-day session will see the election of the House speaker and deputy speaker as well as the tabling of the 14 pending CAG reports on the performance of the previous AAP government. BJP has nominated senior MLAs Vijender Gupta and Mohan Singh Bisht for the election of the speaker and deputy speaker, respectively. The AAP, which has 22 MLAs, is yet to name a leader of opposition although former chief minister Atishi and the party's Delhi unit convener Gopal Rai are said to be frontrunners for the post. *—PTI*

Trump fires another salvo over 'funding' to India

Cong asks Modi to talk to his 'friend' & refute allegations

NEW YORK/NEW DELHI, 22 FEB

US President Donald Trump for the fourth time in recent days claimed that the Biden administration allocated USD 21 million funding to India for "voter turnout", evoking a sharp response from the Congress which urged Prime Minister Narendra Modi to "talk to his friend" and strongly refute the allegation.

The Opposition party demanded a white paper on the funds received in India from developmental agencies, aid mechanisms and multilateral forums. It also sought legal action against the RSS-BJP and "their ecosystem" for making wild allegations against credible civil society members, NGOs and political parties.

In Washington, speaking at a 'Governors Working Session,' Trump said: "Twenty-one million dollars going to my friend Prime Minister Modi in India for voter turnout. We're giving 21 million for voter turnout in India. What about us? I want voter turnout too."

A video clipping from the event was posted on social media by the White House on Friday.

Trump also said that money went to strengthen the political landscape in Bangladesh to a firm that nobody ever heard of.

"Got USD 29 million. They got a check. Can you imagine? You have a little firm, you get 10,000 here, 10,000 there, and then we get 29 million from the United States government.

In New Delhi, reacting to Trump's remarks, the Congress demanded a comprehensive white paper on the funds that political parties, individuals, NGOs, organisations received from developmental agencies, aid mechanisms and multilateral forums.

Putting forward the Congress' demands, Khera said PM Modi must talk to "his friend, US President Trump" and strongly refute the allegation on him that America was about to give USD 21 million to him and India for increasing voter turnout.

Trump had raised similar concerns on Thursday and Wednesday, days after his Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) led by Elon Musk claimed that USAID contributed USD 21 million to the Election Commission to boost voter turnout in India as he listed items on which the "US taxpayer dollars were going to be spent."

On 16 February, DOGE also noted that all of the items have been cancelled. *—PTI*

> **Got USD 29 million. They got a check. Can you imagine? You have a little firm, you get 10,000 here, 10,000 there, and then we get 29 million from the United States government**
>
> -Donald Trump, US President

AFTER SERVING TIME

Pakistan to repatriate 22 Indian fishermen

ISLAMABAD, 22 FEB

Pakistani authorities have released 22 Indian fishermen from Karachi's Malir Jail and are likely to hand them over to India on Saturday, according to a media report.

The fishermen were freed from the jail on Friday after the completion of their sentences, The Express Tribune newspaper quoted Malir Jail superintendent Arshad Shah as saying.

Faisal Edhi, chairman of the Edhi Foundation, arranged transportation for the fishermen to Lahore, from where they will continue their journey back to India.

The Edhi Foundation covered their travel expenses and provided them with gifts and cash.

Edhi also urged both governments to adopt a more compassionate approach toward fishermen who unintentionally cross maritime boundaries.

He highlighted the suffering of their families during their prolonged incarcerations and called for their immediate release and swift repatriation once their sentences were completed.

Pakistani authorities repatriate Indian fishermen through the Wagah border, where Indian authorities facilitate their return to coastal communities after completing official formalities.

The two countries regularly arrest rival fishermen who often cross into the waters of the other country due to poorly demarcated sea frontiers.

The list shared by India showed that there were a total of 462 Pakistanis in Indian jails (381 civilian prisoners and 81 fishermen). *—PTI*

TELANGANA TUNNEL COLLAPSE

At least eight workers are trapped after a portion of an under-construction tunnel collapsed in Telangana. PM Modi dialled Telangana CM Revanth Reddy to get all help from Centre *PHOTO: ANI* *>>>More on Page 4*

Kalaburagi: 17 hospitalised due to food poisoning

KALABURAGI, 22 FEB

Seventeen students from the Government Higher Primary School in Malaghana village were hospitalised on Saturday after experiencing symptoms of stomach pain, dizziness, and fatigue. This comes a day after five other students reported similar symptoms and were admitted to Kalagi Government Hospital.

Health officials, including Chittapur BEO Shashidhar Biradar, mid-day meal officer Prakash Nayakodi, and other local authorities, visited the school and hospital to monitor the situation. Doctors from Korwar Primary Health Center conducted checkups on all students at the school. In response to the health scare, authorities replaced the usual mid-day meal with biscuits and ORS solutions.

The students are receiving medical care at Kalagi Hospital, and their health is under close observation. Even children who were absent on Friday have shown symptoms, prompting anxious parents to stay by their side at hospital.

"Action will be taken against those responsible person and to ensure such mistakes do not happen again", Shashidhar Kosambe, member of the Karnataka State Commission for Protection of Child Rights told **Salar News**.

Authorities are working to identify the source of the health issue. *—Salar News*

Shaktikanta Das *PHOTO: X*

Ex-RBI guv Das now 2nd principal secretary to PM

NEW DELHI, 22 FEB

Former Reserve Bank of India governor Shaktikanta Das was on Saturday appointed the second Principal Secretary to Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

PK Mishra, a retired IAS officer of the Gujarat cadre, is currently serving as the Principal Secretary to the prime minister.

According to an official order, the tenure of Das, a retired IAS officer of the Tamil Nadu cadre, will be "co-terminus" with the term of the prime minister or until further orders, whichever is earlier.

This is the first time that two persons will simultaneously serve as principal secretaries to the prime minister.

Sixty-eight-year old Das has been a career civil servant with over 44 years of distinguished service, primarily in areas of finance, taxation, investment and infrastructure.

He was the central government's revenue secretary. During his tenure as economic affairs secretary in 2016, the Modi government had announced the demonetisation.

Das became the 25th governor of the RBI in 2018 after Urjit Patel resigned.

Das was the second longest serving governor of the RBI in its 90-year history after Benegal Rama Rau, who had a seven-and-a-half-year tenure in the 1950s. *—PTI*

CHAMPIONS TROPHY

India-Pak rivalry reloaded: Who rules today?

DUBAI, 22 FEB

Hyped as a marquee showdown but mostly lopsided on the field, India and Pakistan lock horns in the ICC Champions Trophy here on Sunday with Rohit Sharma's men aiming to seal a semifinal spot and Mohammad Rizwan's team desperate to avoid early elimination from the tournament.

While India are on a high after claiming a measured six-wicket win over a sprightly Bangladesh, Pakistan are evidently tense after the 60-run loss in the tournament-opener against New Zealand.

The sub-continental rivals' last Champion Trophy clash was the 2017 final in which Pakistan walked away with the win and the trophy. Rizwan and Co. would look to draw inspiration from that triumph in London but would also need to scale up their performance in every department.

Though the buzz surrounding the match is nowhere close to being what it used to be at the peak of diplomatic tensions between the two countries, there is an air of quiet anticipation for the Group A clash at the Dubai International Cricket Stadium.

India will have a distinct advantage in every aspect. The side has settled in nicely while Pakistan have flown in a couple of days ago after the drubbing handed by the Black Caps in Karachi.

More often than not, an India-Pakistan clash is as much a battle of nerves as cricketing abilities and India would be in a much better space on both counts come Sunday.

For starters, skipper Rohit, whose form was a major concern in the run-up to the tournament, seems to be getting back to his best if the lucid stroke-making against Bangladesh was anything to go by.

On the other hand, India have a fit-again and in-form Mohammed Shami, who is being brilliantly backed up by Harshit Rana. Shami's fifer against Bangladesh ensured that India did not miss injured talisman Jasprit Bumrah just yet. India are likely to continue with their winning combination *—PTI*

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India's national anthem played at Aus-Eng match

LAHORE , 22 FEB

Left red-faced after India's national anthem played for a fraction of a second at the start of the Australia-England Champions Trophy match here on Saturday, the Pakistan Cricket Board has blamed the ICC for the fiasco and demanded an explanation from the world body. The spectators were left surprised as the Indian national anthem played for a second before being stopped. *—PTI*

PHOTO: SALAR

Aid provided to farmers who were electrocuted

BIDAR, 22 FEB

Dr. Shailendra Beldale, MLA for Bidar South, distributed compensation cheques to the families of farmers who tragically lost their lives due to electrocution. A total of Rs 4 lakh was disbursed, with Rs 2 lakh awarded to the families of each of the two deceased farmers. Additionally, a cheque for Rs 1 lakh was provided to the owner of two oxen that perished in an electric accident. The distribution took place at the MLA's office in Bidar city, facilitated by GESCOM, the local electricity board. Prakash from Marjapur M village died while working in his field, while Jai Bheem from Yadlapur village was electrocuted at his home. *—Salar News*

FIR filed against ex-MP Simmha for hate speech

MYSURU, 22 FEB

Udayagiri police have lodged an FIR against former MP Pratap Simmha following allegations of hate speech made by Syed Abrar, the president of the Mysuru City District Youth Congress Committee. In his complaint, Abrar accused Simmha of making derogatory remarks about the Muslim community, suggesting they are focused on increasing their population. This statement was reportedly made to the media a day after the violent incidents in Udayagiri. The complaint urged police to take action against Simmha for inciting public unrest with such provocative statements and to initiate serious proceedings against him. *—Salar News*

Fraudsters trick 2 men in Kollegal, loot ₹1.30 lakh

CHAMARAJNAGAR, 22 FEB

In separate incidents, two individuals in Kollegal taluk fell victim to a fraudster, losing a total of Rs 1.30 lakh after being tricked into sharing their OTPs for supposedly necessary bank account verification. The victims, identified as Vijay from Satyagala village and Siddappa from Ikkadahalli, received calls from an individual claiming to be a Canara Bank employee while at work on Friday. The caller requested their bank account details for verification purposes and pressured them to share an OTP that was only valid for 30 seconds. After sharing their OTPs, Rs 86,000 was withdrawn from Vijay's account, while Siddappa lost Rs 44,000. Upon contacting their banks, both men were informed that they had been scammed and were advised to file complaints with the police. *—Salar News*

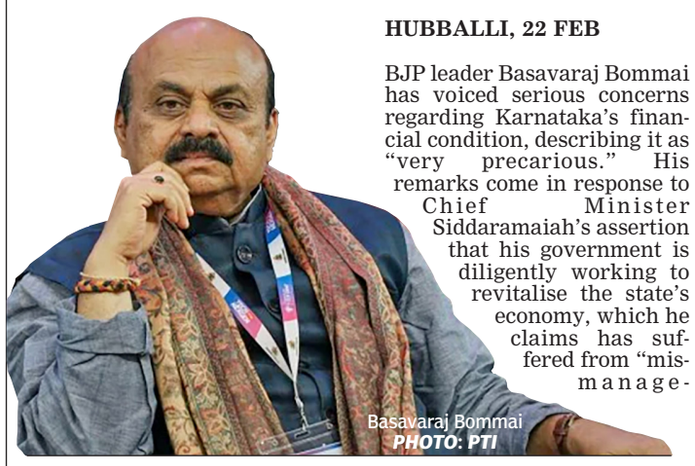
Man kills friend over alleged flirting with wife

BENGALURU, 22 FEB

In a shocking incident, a 34-year-old cab driver was stabbed to death by his friend in Varthur on Friday evening, allegedly over the victim's inappropriate behaviour towards the accused's wife. The deceased, identified as Kishore, a native of Chitradurga residing in Bengaluru, was attacked around 7.30 pm near Kodathi Gate under the Varthur police station limits. The accused, Satish Reddy, fled the scene after the assault and is currently on the run. According to police sources, Reddy and Kishore were friends; however, their relationship had soured after Reddy accused Kishore of persistently flirting with his wife. Despite multiple warnings, Kishore allegedly continued the behaviour, leading to mounting tension between the two. On Friday evening, an inebriated Reddy confronted Kishore on the road and, in a fit of rage, stabbed him. *—Salar News*

K'taka's financial situation 'precarious,' says Bommai

Ex-finance minister urges CM's budget transparency



Basavaraj Bommai
PHOTO: PTI

HUBBALLI, 22 FEB

BJP leader Basavaraj Bommai has voiced serious concerns regarding Karnataka's financial condition, describing it as "very precarious." His remarks come in response to Chief Minister Siddaramaiah's assertion that his government is diligently working to revitalise the state's economy, which he claims has suffered from "mismanagement and chaos" under previous BJP governance.

Bommai accused Siddaramaiah of dodging critical questions about theState's finances, saying, "The financial position of the government of Karnataka is in a very precarious state." He highlighted that the Chief Minister has exceeded the budget allocation through borrowing, yet capital expenditure has not increased. Additionally, he noted that funds for guarantee schemes have not been allocated, further complicating the state's financial crisis.

The former finance minister called for transparency, stating that Siddaramaiah should provide detailed information about his budget, revenue receipts, and expenditures, rather than deflect blame onto the central government. "There is a huge tax burden on the people of Karnataka," Bommai stated, underscoring that over Rs 30,000 crore in additional taxes had been imposed last year, including hikes in motor vehicle tax, stamp duties, and bus fares.

He concluded that the lack of development alongside high taxation presents an alarming situation that the Chief Minister must address. *—PTI*

Everyone wants HDK to be JD(S) State Prez: Nikhil

TUMAKURU, 22 FEB

JD(S) youth wing chief Nikhil Kumaraswamy on Saturday said everyone in the party is of the opinion that his father and Union Minister HD Kumaraswamy should continue as the party's State president.

This statement has come amid talks that the party would soon initiate a process for appointing a new State president.

"Kumaraswamy despite becoming union minister has been functioning in a way ensuring that party organisation doesn't suffer and has been giving time towards it whenever possible amid his work of nation building. He is putting efforts beyond the limitations of his age and health for the last six to seven months," Nikhil Kumaraswamy, who is also the grandson of party patriarch and former Prime Minister HD Deve Gowda said.

HD Kumaraswamy with son Nikhil Kumaraswamy PHOTO: X

Addressing reporters here, Nikhil said that his father is currently recovering from a respiratory infection and is resting for a week.

"The issue of changing the party's state president is irrelevant. Kumaranna (Kumaraswamy) will continue as the state president, and everyone's feeling is that he should continue, including the ordinary karyakartas," he said, adding that organisational polls are on to fill certain vacant posts, as per party constitution.

Nikhil Kumaraswamy, who has suffered three straight electoral defeats, is seen as a strong contender for the state presidency.

To a question whether JD(S) will go with BJP for upcoming taluk and zilla panchayat polls, Nikhil Kumaraswamy said the leadership of both parties will take a call on it in the days ahead. *—PTI*

GANGRAPE SUSPECTS ALMOST FLED CITY: COPS

BENGALURU, 22 FEB

The four men accused of gangraping a Delhi-based woman were minutes away from fleeing Bengaluru when they were apprehended, a senior officer involved in the investigation told **Salar News**. "Any delay in the probe could have allowed them to escape," the officer said.

The arrested were identified as Ajit and Bishnoi from West Bengal, and Shibul from Uttarakhand.

The fourth suspect, Shobhan, is currently undergoing treatment at a hospital for an undisclosed health condition. All four worked at different hotels in the city.

On Thursday night, while she was waiting to meet friends near Jyoti Nivas College Junction, the accused engaged her in conversation in Hindi.

After serving her food, the men allegedly assaulted her multiple times through the night. *—Salar News*

IN MYSURU

CM allocates ₹20 cr for Dasara grounds upgrade

MYSURU, 22 FEB

Ayub Khan, chairman of the Karnataka Exhibition Authority (KEA), expressed gratitude to Chief Minister Siddaramaiah for allocating Rs 20 crore for the enhancement of facilities at the Mysuru Dasara Exhibition grounds. Khan made the announcement during a press conference at his office on Saturday.

The funding will support the construction of a wooden replica of the Belur-Halebidu temple, as well as the installation of musical fountains, which is expected to cost Rs 10 crore.

The remaining funds will be used for completing ongoing projects, upgrading the underground drainage system, improving parking facilities, and adding more stalls to the existing 154.

Khan assured that all ongoing projects will be finalised before the commencement of this year's Dasara celebrations. He also noted that the Chief Minister has instructed KEA to organise exhibitions in Shivamogga, Ballari, Belagavi, and Hubballi.

Siddaramaiah PHOTO: PTI

Consequently, KEA will engage with the district deputy commissioners to make necessary preparations for these events.

Additionally, Khan highlighted plans to conduct events year-round at the Dasara exhibition grounds to ensure profitability and attract visitors consistently.

He informed attendees that KEA collected a rental fee of Rs 5.5 lakh from Kannada actor Dolly Dhananjaya for hosting his wedding ceremony at KEA. *—Salar News*

Mutalik: State govt too soft on Muslims

MYSURU, 22 FEB

Rashtriya Hindu Sena chief Pramod Mutalik urged the State government to initiate action against all people who took part in the Udayagiri violence.

Police issued a show cause notice and an externment to Satish alias Panduranga, who was released on bail after posting an allegedly offensive post to social media.

The issue caused a mob to storm the police station after Satish was taken into custody.

"Why did the police initiate such measures only on Saish?" Mutalik asked. "Does it not apply the same for Muslim religious leader who incited violence?"

He said that his part would launch a state-wide protest if charges weren't pressed against other Muslim leaders. Mutalik claimed that government is soft on Muslims because they "all support Congress". *—Salar News*

MINORITIES' RIGHTS DAY

Minister B Z Zameer Ahmed Khan, CM's Political Secretary Naseer Ahmed, Rajya Sabha MP Lahar Singh Siroya, Archbishop Peter Machado and others marked Minorities Rights Day 2024-25 at the Karnataka State Minorities Commission in Bengaluru on Saturday PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD

Maharashtra halts bus services to K'taka after attack on conductor

BELAGAVI, 22 FEB

Maharashtra Transport Minister Pratap Sarnaik on Saturday ordered the suspension of the state transport buses to Karnataka after an MSRTC bus was attacked.

In a troubling incident that escalated from a personal dispute into a broader interstate issue, four individuals have been arrested for allegedly assaulting a conductor of the Karnataka State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC) bus.

The conductor, Mahadevappa Mallappa Hukkeri, was attacked after he informed a girl, who spoke in Marathi, that he did not understand the language and requested she communicate in Kannada.

The altercation began when the girl, accompanied by a male friend, insisted that the conductor learn Marathi. Following their argument, a larger group gathered and assaulted Hukkeri on multiple occasions. He was subsequently admitted to the Belagavi Institute of Medical Sciences with minor injuries but is reported to be out of danger.

Mahadevappa Mallappa Hukkeri was attacked after he informed a girl, who spoke in Marathi, that he did not understand the language and requested she communicate in Kannada PHOTO: X

- Protests have erupted in response, with local organisations expressing discontent over the treatment of the conductor and the charges filed against him

In a twist, a counter-complaint has been lodged by the 14-year-old girl against Hukkeri, who now faces charges under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act for allegedly making indecent remarks. Belagavi Police Commissioner Lada Martin Marbaniang confirmed this, stating that further investigations are ongoing.

The incident has intensified tensions between Karnataka and Maharashtra, given Belagavi's significant Marathi-speaking population and ongoing demands for the district's merger with Maharashtra.

Protests have erupted in response, with local organisations expressing discontent over the treatment of the conductor and the charges filed against him. *—PTI/Salar News*

TO TACKLE NUISANCE

City cops enforce CCTV mandate at eateries

B Dayananda PHOTO: X

BENGALURU, 22 FEB

In a move aimed at improving public safety and reducing late-night disturbances, Bengaluru Police Commissioner B Dayananda has ordered the installation of CCTV cameras at all bakeries, juice centres, and eateries across the city. This directive was issued during a monthly public grievance session held at the HN Auditorium within the jurisdiction of Jnanabharathi police station on Saturday.

The decision follows a growing number of complaints from local residents and business owners regarding rowdy youth creating disturbances in these establishments during late hours. During the meeting, attendees raised concerns about escalating incidents of public nuisance, including a recent brawl at a bakery in Mallathahalli, involving individuals wielding machetes and daggers over a minor disagreement. One resident lamented that despite contacting the police, there was no immediate intervention.

- The decision follows a growing number of complaints from local residents and business owners regarding rowdy youth creating disturbances in these establishments during late hours.

In response, Commissioner Dayananda stressed the importance of swiftly reporting such incidents to local police.

He indicated that the installation of CCTV cameras would deter troublemakers and provide vital evidence for a rapid police response. He committed to seeking a report from the jurisdictional inspector about the Mallathahalli incident.

Commissioner Dayananda urged compliance with the CCTV mandate, warning that establishments that fail to install surveillance systems could face closure.

He also addressed the issue of traffic violations, warning against obstructive parking that inconveniences both residents and shopkeepers, stating that strict action would be taken against those responsible. *—Salar News*

Traders stuck as BBMP seals shops before Ramadan

BENGALURU, 22 FEB

With Ramadan around the corner, traders at Palace Mall shopping complex on Seppings Road are facing a financial crisis after Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) sealed the complex over unpaid property taxes. Left with no option, many traders have resorted to selling their goods on the roadside or moving in with fellow shopkeepers, dashing festive season hopes.

The affected traders, mostly clothing shop owners, accuse a man named Girish of deceiving them by collecting lakhs of rupees as rent and lease payments. "On 19 February, BBMP officials came and sealed the shops. We were shocked to learn that property taxes were unpaid for years," said Nawaz, a shop owner.

According to the traders, Girish leased the land from its owner, Boranna, for 29 years, constructed the complex, and rented out the shops. He allegedly collected advances of up to Rs 5 lakh from each trader, promising to renew five-year lease agreements.

Fifteen traders were on lease agreements, while five others rented their shops. With no alternative source of income, many are worried about their livelihoods during Ramadan. When they approached Police Commissioner B Dayananda, they were advised to settle matter amicably as it was considered a civil dispute. *—Salar News*

PHOTO: ANI

Court to rule on Karti Chidambaram's plea on 5 March

NEW DELHI, 22 FEB

A Delhi court reserves its decision until 5 March regarding Congress MP Karti Chidambaram's request to stay proceedings in a money laundering case linked to an alleged Chinese visa scam. Special Judge Kaveri Baweja reserved the order following arguments on Karti's application, which contends that the proceedings should be halted due to a lack of proper sanction from relevant authorities.

The Enforcement Directorate initiated the money laundering case against Karti and others concerning the issuance of visas to 263 Chinese nationals in 2011, during his father, P. Chidambaram's, tenure as Home Minister. The case was lodged after an FIR by the ED. —*PTI*

BJP raps Kerala govt for blaming Centre on ASHA pay

NEW DELHI, 22 FEB

The BJP slammed the LDF government in Kerala for blaming the Centre for non-payment of ASHA workers.' The BJP said the Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has already released "much above and over" funds earmarked for the state and said the Kerala government is holding the Centre "responsible" to divert public attention from its own "inefficiency and incapability," BJP national secretary and spokesperson Anil Antony said in a press conference at the party headquarters. The BJP's reaction came days after Kerala Finance Minister KN Balagopal said the ASHA workers' honorarium and incentive payments have been pending for some months because the Centre was not providing their due share. A large number of ASHA workers have been protesting in the state for the several days.—*PTI*

Central team meets with protesting farmers

CHANDIGARH, 22 FEB

A fresh round of talks between the protesting farmers and a central team to discuss the formers' various demands, including a legal guarantee for MSP on crops, is underway here on Saturday. Union Agriculture Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan along with Union minister Pralhad Joshi reached the Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Public Administration -- the meeting venue -- at 6.05pm to meet a 28-member farmers' delegation. Punjab Cabinet ministers Harpal Singh Cheema, Gurmeet Singh Khuddian and Lal Chand Kataruchak were also present at the meeting. The farmers' delegation comprising Jagjit Singh Dallewal and Sarwan Singh Pandher reached the meeting venue earlier. —*PTI*

Nepalese students are Odisha's children: CM

BHUBANESWAR, 22 FEB

Odisha Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi asserted that Nepalese students studying in Odisha are children of the state and will continue to pursue their education with respect and dignity. Majhi made the assertion during a telephonic conversation with Nepal's Foreign Minister Dr Arzu Rana Deuba, a statement issued by the chief minister's office said. He assured Deuba that the state government will ensure strict action against those involved in the alleged suicide of a 20-year-old engineering student and subsequent attack on Nepalese pupils at Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology (KIIT). Majhi met Nepal Embassy officials Sanjeev Das Sharma and Naveen Raj Adhikari at his chamber at Lok Seva Bhawan and said 10 people have been arrested in connection with the incident. —*PTI*

TN won't implement NEP even for ₹10,000 cr: Stalin

He says NEP is regressive, risks driving students from education

CUDDALORE, 22 FEB

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin has reiterated his staunch opposition to the National Education Policy (NEP), stating that he would not implement it even if the Central Government offered Rs 10,000 crore in funding.

Stalin's critique extends beyond the controversial imposition of Hindi; he highlighted numerous other factors that could jeopardise students' futures and undermine the social justice system. He expressed particular concern over the proposed screening tests for admissions to arts and science colleges, akin to the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test for medical courses, as well as the allowance for students to discontinue their studies.

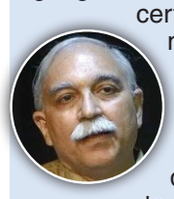
He asserted that the opposition to the NEP is not solely due to language imposition—it is a regressive policy that threatens to drive students away from education. He criticised the NEP for its potential to eliminate financial aid for Scheduled Castes/Tribes and Backward Classes students. "The Centre proposes Rs 2,000 crore for Tamil Nadu if we implement the NEP. I assure you, we will not accept the NEP even for Rs 10,000 crore. I refuse to allow the NEP to push Tamil Nadu back by 2,000 years," he said. —*PTI*

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin greets supporters during a roadshow at Manjakuppam, in Cuddalore district PHOTO: PTI

RSS leader backs gradual Hindi adoption as national language

Mumbai, 22 Feb

RSS functionary Arun Kumar on Saturday said Hindi should gradually progress as a common national language and rejected criticism of the language for "selfish" purposes amid a row over Tamil Nadu CM MK Stalin's accusation of "imposition" of Hindi. Kumar also claimed all languages in India are national languages and there is no regional language. He said lakhs of people from Tamil Nadu do certificate courses in Hindi and there is no need to worry about those who oppose the language for selfish purposes.



Speaking at ABP Network's Ideas of India Summit 2025, the RSS joint general secretary said it was wrong to draw parallels between what happened to Hindus and other minorities in Pakistan and Bangladesh, and the treatment of minorities in "broad-minded" India. The RSS senior functionary's comments came against the backdrop of the Tamil Nadu chief minister's opposition to the National Education Policy, which he has dubbed an attempt to impose Hindi. Observing that disputes over language are unfortunate, Kumar said every state has to develop its language and conduct its business in that particular language. He said all languages are national languages."We have an administrative setup and we need a common national language. At one point, it was Sanskrit but it is not possible today. So what can it be now, it will be Hindi today. —*PTI*

TMC accuses EC and BJP of voter list manipulation

KOLKATA, 22 FEB

The Trinamool Congress (TMC) has levelled serious allegations against certain officials of the Election Commission (EC) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), accusing them of conspiring to include the names of outsiders in West Bengal's voter list to favour the BJP.

Kunal Ghosh, TMC's state general secretary, claimed that these EC officials are adding names without adequate verification, particularly in the border areas of the state. He emphasised that the responsibility of preventing infiltration lies with the Border Security Force (BSF), suggesting that any instances of unauthorised individuals being added to the voter list should be addressed by the central government, which oversees the BSF and allegedly "remotely controls" the EC.

Ghosh referred to reports of an increase in voters in the Champahati region under Baruipur assembly, asserting that any credit for monitoring unauthorised voters should be attributed to local administration and police, not the EC. He urged the BJP and its supporters to direct their grievances regarding infiltration to the central authorities instead of blaming the state or the ruling party.

Kunal Ghosh PHOTO: FB

In response, BJP Rajya Sabha MP Samik Bhattacharya stated, "TMC's strategy of including phantom voters has been revealed, as ruling party leaders are reportedly involved in issuing fake Aadhaar and voter ID cards." He added that the vigilant EC and Union Home Ministry would not permit the TMC to repeat their previous tactics, suggesting that such comments reflect the TMC's desperation ahead of the upcoming assembly polls. —*PTI*

TMC worker beaten to death in Birbhum

KOLKATA, 22 FEB

A Trinamool Congress (TMC) worker, Sheikh Niamul, has died after allegedly being beaten to death in West Bengal's Birbhum district. The incident occurred on Friday night when Niamul was stopped near the Kankratala bus stop by a group of men, who brutally assaulted him with rods and stones.

Niamul's brother, Enamul Sheikh, another TMC member, accused a rival faction of the party, claiming they had worked in support of the BJP during the last Lok Sabha elections.

In contrast, the district TMC has denied the allegations, asserting that BJP members were responsible for the attack, aimed at instilling fear ahead of the 2026 assembly elections. —*PTI*

AHEAD OF CABINET MEETING

Atishi seeks meeting with Rekha on women's aid

NEW DELHI, 22 FEB

AAP leader Atishi has sought a meeting of AAP MLAs with Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta to discuss the Rs 2,500 monthly aid to women promised by the BJP during their assembly poll campaign.

In a letter to Gupta, Atishi questioned why a scheme on the financial aid to women was not approved in the new government's first cabinet meeting when the prime minister had promised it in an election rally.

Atishi, the chief minister in the previous AAP government, sought an appointment to meet the CM on 23 February, along with her party MLAs.

"Prime Minister Narendra Modi in an election rally in Dwarka on 31 January promised Delhi's mothers and sisters that the scheme for Rs 2,500 monthly payment would be passed in the first cabinet meeting after the BJP formed the government," she wrote.

The first cabinet meeting of the BJP government was held on 20 February but the scheme was not passed, she said, adding that the women of Delhi who believed in Modi guarantee were betrayed.

Atishi PHOTO: PTI

- The first cabinet meeting of the BJP government was held on 20 February but the scheme was not passed, she said

BJP leaders, including the CM Gupta, have asserted that the scheme will be implemented from March as was promised by the party.

Gupta and her council of ministers took oath in office on Thursday, following a victory over the AAP. AAP won 22 seats in the polls, Atishi's Kalkaji constituency being one of them. —*PTI*

PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA

Puri slams Punjab over phantom dept minister

NEW DELHI, 22 FEB

Union Minister Hardeep Singh Puri took a swipe at AAP over its Punjab minister Kuldeep Singh Dhaliwal holding charge of a non-existent department for months, saying this was possible only in a government led by that party.

Dhaliwal has been told that he is left with only the NRI Affairs portfolio as the administrative reforms department he has been holding for the past nearly 21 months did not exist, according to a Punjab government notification.

No staff was given to the minister for the Administrative Reforms department, sources said. Puri said, "For 20 months, someone was heading a department that didn't even exist, this can happen only in an AAP government." —*PTI*

BRS, BJP fear caste survey backlash, says Revanth

HYDERABAD, 22 FEB

Telangana Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy alleged the BRS and BJP are "finding fault" with the data from the caste survey conducted in the state, as they would be questioned by the backward classes about their share in power.

Reddy held a meeting with backward class associations after the opposition BRS and BJP claimed that the caste survey data is inaccurate. He stressed that the caste survey, conducted during November-December last year, was carried out meticulously.

Reddy said that the BJP is trying to undermine the caste survey, as it would affect the interests of one or two castes who wield power, if the survey passes judicial scrutiny.

The previous BRS government did not disclose the details of the Comprehensive Family Survey conducted during its tenure, as it was full of errors, he added, saying they used the survey report only during elections and not for the benefit of the people.

"Opposition parties conspired to ruin the entire system by distorting the process. The BC fraternity should take this seriously," Reddy cautioned. —*PTI*

Mahayuti win clear verdict for Sena, NCP: Shah

Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis with Union Home Minister Amit Shah in Pune PHOTO: PTI

PUNE, 22 FEB

Union Home Minister Amit Shah announced that the recent assembly elections in Maharashtra have pronounced a clear verdict regarding the genuine factions of the Shiv Sena and Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), following a resounding victory for the BJP-led Mahayuti coalition.

In the elections held in November, the Mahayuti secured 230 out of 288 seats, while the factions led by Uddhav Thackeray and Sharad Pawar significantly underperformed. Addressing an event where he distributed sanction letters to 20 lakh beneficiaries of the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), Shah expressed gratitude to the people of Maharashtra for their overwhelming support.

"Your blessings have brought the Mahayuti to power and clarified which Shiv Sena and NCP are genuine," he stated. Shah credited Prime Minister Narendra Modi for initiating the second phase of PMAY during the first cabinet meeting of the newly-elected government.

He highlighted the impact of the scheme, noting that Maharashtra has received the highest number of houses under PMAY, with a commitment to provide a total of five crore homes by 2029. —*PTI*

FIRST COLLECTIVE VISIT

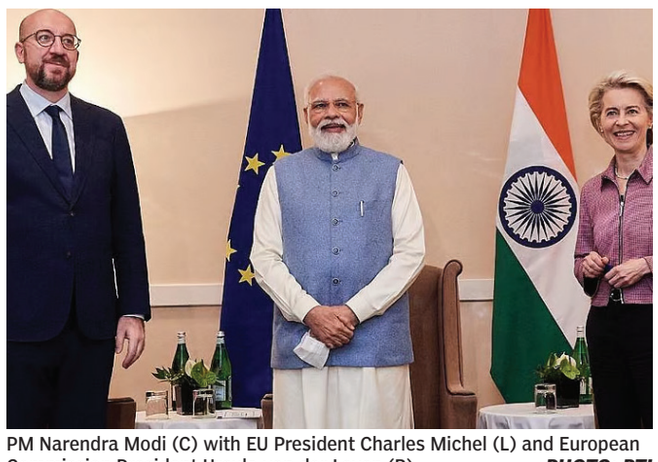
EU leadership visit to strengthen ties: MEA

NEW DELHI, 22 FEB

The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has announced that European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's visit to India next week will significantly enhance bilateral relations. Scheduled for 27-28 February, Leyen will be accompanied by the European Union College of Commissioners, marking their first collective visit to India.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will engage in delegation-level discussions with Leyen, alongside the second ministerial meeting of the India-EU Trade and Technology Council (TEC). The visit aims to strengthen cooperation in key areas as both parties celebrate nearly two decades of strategic partnership.

"This visit is a pivotal moment as we enter the third decade of our strategic partnership," stated the MEA. Leyen's prior visits include a bilateral trip in April 2022 and participation in the G20 Leaders' Summit in September 2023.



PM Narendra Modi (C) with EU President Charles Michel (L) and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (R) PHOTO: PTI

"This will be the first ever visit of the EU College of Commissioners together to India and among the first such visits since the start of the mandate of the current European Commission in December 2024 after the European parliamentary elections held in June 2024," the MEA said.

India and the European Union have been strategic partners since 2004 and their bilateral ties have expanded and deepened across a wide range of areas.

"As the two sides enter the third decade of the strategic partnership, the visit of President von der Leyen and the EU College of Commissioners will pave the way for further strengthening of bilateral relations based on growing convergences," the MEA said.

In a related development, MEA also highlighted the "exemplary ties" between India and Bhutan following Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay's official visit from 20-21 February. Tobgay attended the inaugural leadership conclave of the School of Ultimate Leadership (SOUL), inaugurated by Modi. During their meeting, Tobgay referred to Modi as his "elder brother" and sought guidance on transforming public service in Bhutan.

The visit and exchanges demonstrate the ongoing commitment to fostering strong relationships based on trust and cooperation between India, Bhutan, and the European Union, as noted by the MEA. —*PTI*

Former MP CM slams Air India over broken seat

BHOPAL/MUMBAI, 22 FEB

PHOTO: PTI

Union Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan on Saturday slammed Tata Group-owned Air India for allotting him an allegedly broken and sunk seat. Chouhan on X said he had boarded the Delhi-bound Air India flight AI436 from Bhopal for Delhi.

"When I reached my seat and sat down, I found that it was broken and sunk. Sitting was uncomfortable," the former Madhya Pradesh said. He claimed several seats on the flight were in a similar condition.

"Fellow passengers insisted that I exchange seats with them and take a better one, but I didn't want to trouble any of my friends for my own comfort. So, I decided to complete my journey on the same seat," he stated.

Chouhan said he assumed Air India's service would have improved after being taken over by the Tata management.

"I am not concerned about my discomfort, but charging passengers full fare and then making them sit on defective and uncomfortable seats is unethical.

Isn't this a form of deception towards passengers?" he asked.

Air India apologised for the incident and ordered a thorough probe. Civil Aviation Minister K Rammohan Naidu said swift action has been taken.

"We spoke to Air India immediately on this issue and instructed them to take necessary action. From our side Directorate General of Civil Aviation will also be looking into details of the matter promptly. And I have personally spoken to Shivraj also," Naidu said. —*PTI*

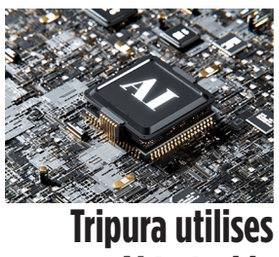


PHOTO: UNSPLASH

Tripura utilises AI to tackle tax evasion

AGARTALA, 22 FEB

Tripura's Chief Minister Manik Saha announced the state's adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) to identify tax evaders during the GST 'Jaagrookta Abhiyan' at Prajna Bhavan. Saha highlighted that tax collection is vital for development, noting that the state's budget for 2024-25 totals ₹27,800 crore, with only Rupee Foradian3,700 crore generated from its own revenue. He emphasised that increased tax revenue is essential for infrastructure development and combating tax evasion, particularly through fraudulent input tax credits. The CM urged citizens to pay GST, stressing that the funds are crucial for the state's growth, aligning with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision for India to achieve developed status by 2047. He warned that tax evaders would face legal consequences. *—PTI*

India-Japan joint military exercise to start on 24 Feb

NEW DELHI, 22 FEB

India and Japan are set to initiate the sixth edition of the joint military exercise 'Dharma Guardian' from 24 February to 9 March. Conducted in Japan's East Fuji Manoeuvre Training area, the exercise aims to bolster interoperability between the two nations' forces through joint urban warfare and counter-terrorism operations under a UN mandate. The Indian contingent, comprising 120 personnel from the Madras Regiment, departed for Japan on Saturday. The Japan Ground Self Defence Force will be represented by the 34th Infantry Regiment. This exercise, alternating between the two countries, underscores growing bilateral defence cooperation and the mutual commitment to a secure and inclusive Indo-Pacific region,as highlighted by the Indian Army Chief's recent visit to Japan in 2024.*—PTI*

Chhattisgarh forces discover Maoist cache

SUKMA, 22 FEB

In a significant operation, security forces uncovered a Maoist cache in the Sukma district of Chhattisgarh, seizing an array of weapons and explosive materials on Saturday morning. The discovery was made by a joint team comprised of the 131st battalion of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), the 203rd battalion of CoBRA, and local district forces. Acting on intelligence regarding Naxalite activity, the team conducted an operation from their newly established camp in Mettaguda. Upon cordoning off the forested area near the Chintavagu River, they located the Maoist dump, which yielded two country-made firearms, 50 grams of explosive powder, a pair of binoculars, syringes, Maoist uniforms, literature, diaries, and various electronic items. *—PTI*

Terrorist hideout busted in Reasi; arms, ammo seized

REASI, 22 FEB

A terrorist hideout was busted in a remote area in Jammu and Kashmir's Reasi district on Saturday, leading to the seizure of arms and ammunition, officials said. The hideout was unearthed by a special operations group of Jammu and Kashmir Police in the Simbli-Shajroo forest near Chakrass in the Mahore area of the district, the officials said. The search of the hideout led to the recovery of four under barrel grenade launchers (UBGLs), one full and three empty ma gazines of AK assault rifle, 268 rounds of assorted ammunition and four packets of detonators, they said. No one has been arrested in connection with the recovery so far, the officials said.*—PTI*

8 trapped in SLBC tunnel mishap in Telangana

Trapped men include 2 engineers from US firm & 6 workers

HYDERABAD, 22 FEB

The under construction stretch in the tunnel of Srisailam Left Bank Canal (SLBC) project where a section of roof collapsed, in Nagarkurnool district, on Saturday **PHOTO: PTI**

Eight people were trapped inside after a section of roof collapsed in the under construction stretch in the tunnel of Srisailam Left Bank Canal (SLBC) project, Telangana Irrigation Minister N Uttam Kumar Reddy said on Saturday.

Speaking to reporters at the accident site in Nagarkurnool district, he said the state government is taking the help of experts, including those who rescued the trapped workers in an incident in Uttarakhand last year, and sought the help of the Indian Army and NDRF.

Those trapped inside are two engineers, two machine operators and four workers.

The personnel were trapped 14 kms inside the tunnel. The seepage of water and soil began slowly and increased later prompting the workers to come out. They also heard a loud sound as they felt some "geological disturbance" outside the tunnel, he said.

Those working ahead of a boring machine inside the tunnel were stuck there, he said. "Our government is doing everything to save the lives of those eight persons. We also spoke to the experts involved in saving the individuals in the Uttarakhand incident," he said.

The personnel of state fire service, Disaster Response Force were also ready to join the effort, Reddy said. The rescue effort is planned to be undertaken after the geological disturbance stabilises, he said. "Because, it is 14 kms inside, there will be some challenges. But, we are getting the best tunnel experts in the country to oversee the rescue efforts," Uttam Kumar Reddy said. The rescue personnel would reach the site by Saturday night.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Narendra Modi called Telangana Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy to inquire about the incident and assured all possible assistance from the Centre for the ongoing rescue operation. *—PTI*

AMID INCREASING THREATS

Army to enhance air defence with new guns, radars

NEW DELHI, 22 FEB

PHOTO: PTI

In response to the increasing threat posed by drones and disruptive technologies in modern warfare, the Indian Army is set to bolster its air defence capabilities. The Corps of Army Air Defence (AAD) plans to replace two outdated platforms and introduce new fragmentation ammunition for existing guns, alongside deploying advanced radar systems.

Lieutenant General Sumer Ivan D'Cunha, Director General of AAD, confirmed that a contract for the indigenously developed Quick Reaction Surface to Air Missile (QRSAM) system is expected to be placed within the next four to five months. He stressed the importance of modernisation in line with the 'Aatmanirbhar Bharat' initiative, calling for the Indian industry to ensure timely deliveries.

The AAD currently operates a range of missile systems and guns, including the L70 and Zu-23mm, which are set for replacement. The first trials for the indigenous successor to the L70 are anticipated in July, with a request for proposals for 220 new guns already issued.

Amidst recent military conflicts, including the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, Lt Gen D'Cunha highlighted the growing threat of drones and counter-drone systems. He noted that utilising fragmentation ammunition could provide a cost-effective solution against numerous drone threats, rather than relying solely on missile systems.

Additionally, the AAD plans to enhance radar capabilities, including the acquisition of Low-Level Light Weight radars to detect small drones, thereby improving operational readiness in varied terrains. *—PTI*

Investigators are currently examining whether the brothers were directly involved in the deaths **PHOTO: xxx**

Husbands face arrest in WB triple murder

KOLKATA, 22 FEB

The husbands of two women whose bodies, along with a girl's, were discovered in their Kolkata home, are likely to face arrest after post-mortem examinations indicated homicide rather than suicide.

The deceased—identified as Sudeshna and Romi Dey—were found dead in their Tangra residence, while their husbands, Pranay and Prasun Dey, along with Pranay's son and Prasun's daughter, were injured in a subsequent car accident that occurred early Wednesday. It was one of the injured who informed authorities of the deaths.

A senior police officer stated that the brothers will be apprehended once they are discharged from the hospital, with one arrest expected as early as Saturday. The initial claims made by the brothers suggested a suicide pact involving porridge laced with sleeping pills, but post-mortem findings contradicted this narrative. The women had slit wrists and severe throat injuries, while the girl reportedly died from poisoning.

Investigators are currently examining whether the brothers were directly involved in the deaths. Forensic teams are analysing samples and reviewing CCTV footage from the house to discern activity leading up to the incident. *—PTI*

POLICE PROBE IRS OFFICER, KIN'S DEATH IN KOCHI

KOCHI, 22 FEB

Authorities are intensifying their investigation into the perplexing deaths of Maneesh Vijay, a senior Customs officer, along with his mother, Shakuntala Agarwal, and sister, Shalini Vijay, in Kochi.

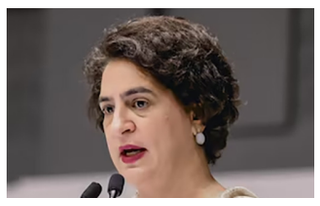
The bodies of Maneesh (43) and Shalini were found hanging, while Shakuntala was discovered deceased in her bed, covered with white cloth and flower petals. Preliminary investigations suggest a potential suicide in the case of the siblings, while the cause of Shakuntala's death will only be confirmed after an autopsy.

Notably, Shalini had been summoned to appear in a Jharkhand court on 15 February related to a CBI case regarding her government job irregularities. Maneesh had purchased flowers a day earlier and left notes instructing that documents be handed to his younger sister, who is currently in Dubai.

Police emphasise they are exploring all avenues but have not established a direct connection between the deaths and Shalini's legal troubles. Further developments are anticipated following the arrival of the younger sister for the autopsy. *—PTI*

IN WAYANAD, MALAPPURAM

Boost animal attack funds: Priyanka to CM



Pinarayi Vijayan; Priyanka Gandhi **PHOTO: PTI**

T'PURAM, 22 FEB

Congress General Secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra has written to Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, urging him to increase funding for mitigation measures against animal attacks in the high-range areas of Wayanad and Malappuram districts.

In her letter dated 20 February, Priyanka, who is also the MP from Wayanad, has suggested that a specialised team be created in consultation with the Union Environment Ministry and dispatched to the area to expedite urgent measures for protecting human lives and habitations in high-risk areas for animal attacks.

"I would be happy to assist in any way possible," she added.

Priyanka claimed that during her recent interactions with the local population in areas affected by animal attacks, she observed increasing fear among the people, along with a noticeable lack of faith in the local authorities' ability to protect them. "They do not trust mitigation measures such as trenches, as their experience has overwhelmingly shown that a lack of maintenance renders them ineffective. Hanging fences are unable to stop large predators like tigers and leopards..." She further stated that seven people in her constituency lost their lives in animal attacks between 27 December, 2024, and 12 February. These deaths, coupled with the loss of livelihoods, have been "causing fear, suffering, and immense anguish" among the people in the area. *—PTI*

COURT TO RESUME WFI HARASSMENT CASE HEARING ON 3 MARCH

NEW DELHI, 22 FEB

A Delhi court will resume on 3 March the recording of the statement of one of the female wrestlers who have accused former Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) chief Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh of sexual harassment.

The matter, which was scheduled to be taken up on Saturday, was adjourned because Additional Chief Judicial Magistrate Vaibhav Chaurasiya was on leave.

The court had, in May last year, framed the charges of sexual harassment and using force to outrage women's modesty against Singh in the criminal case filed against him by the female wrestlers.

Singh pleaded not guilty in the case and claimed trial.

It has also framed the charge of criminal intimidation against co-accused and former WFI assistant secretary Vinod Tomar in the case. *—PTI*

CLEANING AT MAHA KUMBH

Puja material and other waste being collected at the Sangam during the ongoing Mahakumbh Mela, in Prayagraj, Saturday **PHOTO: PTI**

6 held in Manipur for links with banned outfit

IMPHAL, 22 FEB

Six members of the proscribed Kangleipak Communist Party (Ibungo Ngangom) have been arrested in Imphal West district, while two individuals from the G5 Organisation were detained in Imphal East for alleged extortion activities.

The arrests occurred at Koutruk Makha Leikai Church, according to a senior police officer. The two G5 Organisation members, Ningthoujam Yamba Singh, 43,and Usham Netaji Singh, 35, are suspected of extorting money from sand-laden trucks in areas including Sekmai, Irilbung, Koirengei, and Patsoi, and were also involved in snatching vehicle keys from truck drivers.

PHOTO: ANI

In a broader security operation, the Manipur Police, alongside central forces, have been recovering illegal firearms following a governor's appeal for citizens to surrender arms. In Kakching Wairi, at least 12 firearms were seized, and during operations in Tengnoupal district, multiple improvised explosive devices were discovered and subsequently destroyed by a bomb disposal team. The police continue to carry out extensive search operations in the wake of ongoing ethnic violence in the state.

Meanwhile, in response to Manipur Governor Ajay Kumar Bhalla's appeal to voluntarily surrender looted and illegally held weapons within seven days, an umbrella body of Imphal-based civil society organisations of the Meiteis requested him to "engage formally with local youth leaders to ensure a cooperative approach in recovering arms from civilian volunteers".

In a statement, the Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity also said that the "seven-day timeframe is too short for meaningful engagement with the stakeholders and the public." *—PTI*

'FESTIVAL OF CHAPRIS'

FIR against Farah Khan over Holi remark

MUMBAI, 22 FEB

Vikas Fhatak; Farah Khan **PHOTO: ANI**

A criminal complaint has been filed against Bollywood filmmaker and choreographer Farah Khan by Vikas Fhatak, also known as Hindustani Bhau, for allegedly insulting Hindu religious feelings.

The complaint filed through Advocate Ali Kaashif Khan Deshmukh alleges that Farah Khan insulted Hindu religious sentiments by referring to the Holi festival as being celebrated by "chapris".

The controversy erupted after Farah Khan made derogatory remarks about the Holi festival, referring to its celebration as something done by "chapris," a term often used in a derogatory manner.

According to Fhatak, this statement was offensive and intended to hurt Hindu sentiments. The complaint was officially lodged with the Khar Police, seeking the registration of a First Information Report (FIR) against Khan.

Advocate Ali Kaashif Khan Deshmukh said, "My client has been raising his voice since inception against all individuals and entities whose spreading hatred and derogatory remarks against religions. It is very shameful that people who claim to have high stature in the Bollywood industry have no control over their words."

"We have filed the complaint today asking for the registration of an FIR against the accused, and awaiting an investigation by the Khar Police," he added. The legal document states that the complaint is filed under sections 196, 299, 302, and 353 of the BNS, 2023, for deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings, promotion of enmity, and uttering words with intent to wound religious sentiments. The complaint further argues that Khan misused her rights under Article 19 o which guarantees freedom of speech and expression, by making these offensive remarks.

The Khar Police are yet to register an FIR in the matter, and the investigation is pending. *—ANI*

Meerut mosque razed with consent for RRTS

MEERUT , 22 FEB

PHOTO: ANI

A decades-old mosque located on Delhi Road in Meerut was demolished to make way for the construction of the Regional Rapid Transit System (RRTS) Corridor.

The demolition was carried out with the consent of the local Muslim community after consultations with officials and the mosque's management, officials said.

According to authorities, the mosque was causing obstruction in the progress of the Rapid Rail project, prompting the decision to remove it.

The process began with members of the Muslim community using hammers to dismantle parts of the mosque on Thursday. Later, the administration used a bulldozer to complete the demolition in the late hours of the night. Additional District Magistrate (City) Brijesh Kumar Singh confirmed that the mosque's removal was carried out with mutual agreement.

Haji Swale Heen, a representative from the mosque, said, "We removed the mosque on our own, but we possess documents from 1857 that prove the historicity of this mosque." *—PTI*

PUBLIC GOODS

Protesters during a rally against the recent budget efficiency, in Jakarta, Indonesia. The movement, 'Dark Indonesia,' targets budget cuts in education and administrative costs, the latter of which has reportedly led to civil servants having to work in dim lighting
PHOTO: PTI

Global press freedom drops; increase in deaths

Freedom of the press has been thrust back into the spotlight after the White House barred the news agency Associated Press from attending presidential news conferences.

It's one of many prominent actions taken by the second Trump administration against the press, coming as the State Department confirmed it would cancel existing press subscriptions, and the culling of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) which funded independent media initiatives in countries without a free press.

But while the US government's relationship with the press and press freedom is increasingly fraught, the reality is that few nations are considered "good" at maintaining a safe and independent environment for the media to operate.

RSF's annually published Press Freedom Index monitors abuses against journalists and the political, legal, economic, sociocultural and safety frameworks they operate in.

In 2024, it found press freedom dropped globally compared to 2023 levels, with only eight nations — predominantly in northern Europe — being considered to have a "good" press freedom situation.

Threats of physical violence aren't the only pressures facing journalists.

In the first six months of 2024, 12 per cent of attacks against the press in EU member and candidate states were physical. A quarter were due to censorship, and a third to verbal attacks, including intimidation and threats, according to a Media Freedom and Rapid Response report.

Online attacks are also prominent.

"We've seen actually a rise in online types of attacks and pressures: a lot of spoofing, smear campaigns," Ena Bavcic, an advocacy officer at the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF) said.

"Depending on the group of journalists that are targets, for example women, these are usually threats that combine some sort of hate speech and pressures against their family members."

There was a 22 per cent increase in killings in 2024, with at least 361 journalists imprisoned. The threat isn't just of physical violence but includes online and legal abuse
PHOTO: ANI

In the US, data from the non-partisan Freedom of the Press Foundation showed 2024 had the third-most attacks on the press reported since 2017.

2024 was a record year for journalist deaths, which have steadily increased since 2021, according to CPJ data.

"Last year we saw a 22 per cent increase in killings on 2023 and that was largely driven by the Israel-Gaza war, which in 2024 accounted for 85 of the journalists and media workers deaths," said Ginsberg. "All of those deaths were at the hands of the Israeli military. Most of those killed were Palestinians."

Journalist imprisonments have also trended upward since 2000. The CPJ found 361 journalists were imprisoned at the start of December 2024. China, Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, Myanmar, Belarus and Russia account for more than half of all known journalist imprisonments. Most jailed journalists are charged with anti-state violations.

Deterioration of political protections for journalist safety and rising reports of threat-making that causes journalists to self-censor or avoid public interest reporting and investigations are occurring all around the world.

"Attacks on journalists, smearing campaigns against journalists have created a chilling effect where there is just a much smaller number of journalists who can continue to report independently," said Ginsberg.

This makes it hard to detect even small improvements in press freedom. While deaths and arrests may decline, it may also be due to the coercive impacts of real or implied threats to press safety.

Autocrats will also suppress free and independent press to restrict the flow of information, Ginsberg said. "Freedom of information, of which press freedom is clearly a part, is essential to our freedoms and everybody's freedoms."

Protecting press freedom may require legal and regulatory safeguards. The EU, for instance, introduced the European Media Freedom Act as a step towards protecting media rights.

Self-regulation, where journalists and media companies adhere to journalistic principles and ethical conduct, could also help to build back trust in the institution. A public that sees value in having independent and free media can add a layer of protection to those in the field. *—DW News*

SALAR

Asking AI about health is risky, misinformation likely

More people are turning to generative artificial intelligence (AI) to help them in their daily and professional lives. ChatGPT is one of the most well-known and widely available generative AI tools. It gives tailored, plausible answers to any question for free.

There is so much potential for generative AI tools to help people learn about their health. But the answers are not always correct. Relying solely on ChatGPT for health advice can be risky and cause unnecessary concern.

Generative AI is still a relatively new technology, and is constantly changing. Our new study provides the first Australian data about who is using ChatGPT to answer health questions, for what purposes.

The results can help tell people how to use this new technology for their health, and the new skills needed to use it safely – in other words, to build "AI health literacy".

In June 2024 we asked a nationally representative sample of more than 2,000 Australians if they had used ChatGPT to answer health questions.

One in ten (9.9 per cent) had asked ChatGPT a health question in the first half of 2024.

We also found the proportion of people using ChatGPT for health was higher for people who had low health literacy, were born in a non-English speaking country, or spoke another language at home.

This suggests ChatGPT may be supporting people who find it hard to engage with traditional forms of health information in Australia.

The most common questions that people asked ChatGPT related to learning about a health condition (48 per cent), finding out what symptoms mean (37 per cent) asking about actions (36 per cent) or understanding medical terms (35 per cent).

More than half (61 per cent) had asked at least one question that would usually require clinical advice. We classified these questions as "riskier." Asking ChatGPT what your symptoms mean can give you a rough idea, but cannot substitute clinical advice.

People who were born in a non-English speaking country or who spoke another language at home were more likely to ask these types of questions.

The number of people using generative AI for health information is likely to grow. In our study, 39 per cent of people who had not yet used ChatGPT for health would consider doing so in the next six months.

The overall number of people using generative AI tools for health information is even higher if we consider other tools such as Google Gemini, Microsoft Copilot, and Meta AI.

Notably, in our study we saw that people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities may be more likely to use ChatGPT for health information.

If they were asking ChatGPT to translate health information, this adds another layer of complexity. Generative AI tools are generally less accurate in other languages.

We need investment in services (whether human or machine) to ensure speaking another language is not a barrier to high quality health information.

Generative AI is here to stay, presenting both opportunities and risks to people who use it for health information.

On the one hand, this technology appeals to people who already face significant barriers accessing health care and health information. One of its key benefits is its ability to instantly provide health information that is easy to understand.

A recent review of studies showed generative AI tools are increasingly capable of answering general health questions using plain language, although they were less accurate for complex health topics.

This has clear benefits as most health information is written at a level that is too complex for the general population, including during the pandemic.

On the other hand, people are turning to general-purpose AI tools for health advice. This is riskier for questions that require clinical judgment and a broader understanding of the patient.

There have already been case studies showing the dangers of using general purpose AI tools to decide whether to go to hospital or not.

We need to help people think carefully about the kinds of questions they're asking AI tools, and connect them with appropriate services that can answer these riskier questions.

We urgently need AI health literacy skills. This need will grow as more people use AI tools for health. *—PTI*

The increase in AI usage is a sign that health literacy is lacking
PHOTO: FREEPIK

LETTERS write to us at salarenglishdigital@gmail.com

Thousands seek refuge in Burundi as war escalates in Congo

Burundi has been facing a massive influx of refugees as families flee fighting in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

"Just in the first two weeks, we have received 42,000 people already seeking asylum," said Brigitte Mukanya-Eno, a representative of the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in Burundi. She adds the agency has been working with a contingency plan "targeting about 58,000 people who could cross" over three months.

The majority of Congolese who have fled recently come from the province of South Kivu, which borders Burundi and where the 23 March Movement (M23), rebels continue to expand their zone of occupation.

After capturing the city of Goma, the M23 took control of Kavumu airport and Bukavu, also now seizing the town of Kamanyola.

Shabani, Mathilda and Marcelo belong to a group of Congolese refugees who have arrived in a working-class neighborhood of the Burundian capital, Bujumbura. They are currently living with families who took them in.

"We have neither food nor water. We do not even have wells to draw water. May the Burundian government help us because we are really afraid to go home," Shabani tells DW.

And Marcelo adds: "Since we have families here, they should allow us to live with our families until the war is over."

But with the situation in the DRC deteriorating each day, it seems unlikely the refugees can return home in the near future.

The unchecked advance of the Rwandan-backed M23 is stoking fears of a regional conflagration. Local media reports say Burundi's army has accelerated the extraction of its soldiers deployed on the Rusizi plain in the DRC.

Since October 2023, Burundi has sent more than 10,000 soldiers to help the Congolese army fight the M23 and other armed groups.

With the influx of refugees from Congo also "a small number of Burundian nationals have returned to their country, fleeing the clashes," says Matthey Saltmarsh, a UNHCR spokesperson.

People are mainly arriving at the Gatumba border post, close to the capital Bujumbura, he adds.

Some of these refugees are seeking asylum in Burundi to legalize their stay. Others prefer to rent houses, pay for hotels or stay with host families. But the Burundian government is unwilling to accept this.

Nearly 42,000 refugees from Congo sought asylum in Burundi in the first two weeks. While Burundian people have been welcoming, they insist it is a temporary measure and warn to stay vigilant against infiltrators
PHOTO: ANI

Government authorities have been monitoring the refugee groups. In a signed statement, Martin Niteretse, Burundi's Minister of Home Affairs, Public Security and Community Development, said:

"Burundi has decided to gather them in Gihanga and Cibitoke to verify personal identities, to separate civilians from possible military, the sick from the healthy, the children from the adults, so that we can help them."

Vianney Ndayisaba, a civil society member, tells DW the government should be vigilant in receiving Congolese refugees to ensure their safety while protecting the Burundian population: "We agree with the reception of refugees. But the urgency is to create a place for shelter, that they do not rent houses. They should be registered as refugees to guarantee them security, that is necessary."

Like Ndayisaba, many Burundians fear rebels from the east of the DRC could now infiltrate Burundi.

The Burundian president, Evariste Ndayishimiye, expressed his concern of a regional war if urgent measures were not taken to end the escalation of hostilities in the eastern DRC.

North of Bujumbura, Buterere is one of the most densely populated districts of Burundi's economic capital where UN agencies and the central administration are concentrated.

Marthe is a 42-year-old woman from Bukavu, around 150 kilometers away across the border in the DRC. A widow, Marthe and her children have been staying with a host family near Bujumbura for a week. She seems traumatized by the war in Bukavu.

"We fled insecurity, war, lots of gunfire. I had nine children, but we split up. I arrived with only six children. We have no money, we left everything behind," she tells DW.

Physically exhausted, with no legal documents, Marthe and her children spent the last night in a prayer room, to escape police raids of irregular refugees.

Sarah Kumi is the head of the family hosting Marthe and her children. A bilingual teacher, Sarah speaks French and Lingala. But Marthe, nicknamed Mamy, and her children speak only Swahili.

"Mamy is unable to speak French, how do you communicate? But my sister speaks French, Kirundi and Swahili. But when she is not here, she explains herself with gestures, but she is adapting," says Sara Kumi.

Mamy and her children sleep in a cramped living room and barely eat. These difficult living conditions have prompted Mamy to apply for asylum to legalize her situation and move to refugee sites.

But with number of Congolese refugees in Bujumbura steadily increasing, humanitarian aid organizations are struggling to keep pace.

Bintou Keita is the head of MONUSCO, the UN's peacekeeping mission to the DRC. She expressed concern to the UN Security Council over the M23's advance, which is approaching the junction of the three borders between DRC, Rwanda and Burundi.

UN officials told the UN Security Council that warring parties must return to the negotiation table and work towards peace. *—DW News*

US threatens to shut off Starlink in Ukraine

WASHINGTON DC, 22 FEB

The United States has threatened to cut off Ukraine's access to Starlink satellite internet terminals if Kyiv does not reach a deal with the US regarding critical mineral resources. US and Ukrainian officials are currently negotiating the terms of a revised minerals deal after President Volodymyr Zelensky refused to sign an initial proposal. US President Donald Trump said earlier on 21 February that the parties are "pretty close" to an agreement. US negotiators have warned that Ukraine would lose access to Starlink terminals, owned by billionaire Elon Musk's company SpaceX, if Kyiv did not sign the deal, sources told Reuters. Starlink internet terminals have played a crucial role in securing communications in the war in Ukraine. ***—Agencies***

Brazil SC orders ban of video platform Rumble

SAO PAULO, 22 FEB

A Brazilian Supreme Court justice has ordered the nationwide suspension of video-sharing platform Rumble for allegedly defying court orders. Justice Alexandre de Moraes issued the ruling after Rumble failed to appoint a legal representative in Brazil within the stipulated 48 hours. He accused the platform of "repeatedly, consciously and willingly" ignoring Brazilian legal mandates, including the removal of the account of fugitive Allan dos Santos. Rumble contended that the ruling represents "unprecedented censorship" and reaffirmed its commitment to free speech, asserting its refusal to censor political dissidents based in the United States. ***—PTI***

NZ Navy reports live-fire exercises by Chinese vessel

WELLINGTON, 22 FEB

New Zealand's navy confirmed it observed a Chinese ship, the Zunyi, firing live rounds during naval exercises in international waters on Saturday. This followed a similar incident on Friday that disrupted flights, prompting Australia's Defence Minister Richard Marles to express concerns over China's lack of adequate notification regarding the drills. He characterised the timing as "disconcerting" for commercial aviation. New Zealand noted that while the drills were conducted in accordance with international law, the notice given by China fell short of best practices. Both nations have been monitoring a Chinese task group comprising a frigate, a cruiser, and a supply tanker since they were sighted off Australia's coast. ***—DW News***

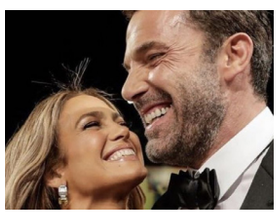


PHOTO: X

Lopez, Ben Affleck are now legally divorced

LOS ANGELES, 22 FEB

Jennifer Lopez and Ben Affleck are officially divorced and single. A Los Angeles Superior Court judge approved their divorce settlement on 6 January, which took effect on 21 February, following California's mandatory six-month period since Lopez filed to dissolve their two-year marriage. The divorce was amicably resolved through mediation in September, avoiding lengthy court proceedings. Lopez has reverted to her maiden name, dropping 'Affleck'. Financial aspects of the settlement is confidential, with neither party responsible for spousal support, and no child custody issues present. The couple married in July 2022, but Lopez filed for divorce in August, citing a separation over a year prior. This was their second relationship, having previously dated in the early 2000s. ***—PTI***

Trump eyes tariffs to counter digital taxes

US Prez vows to block unfair foreign policies

WASHINGTON DEC, 22 FEB

US President Donald Trump is considering new tariffs on countries that impose digital services taxes on American companies and tightening rules on Chinese investments in the US. This move signals a broadening of his global trade war strategy.

Trump signed a memo ordering the US Trade Representative to revisit investigations from his first term into digital services taxes imposed by countries like France, the UK, Turkey, and potentially Canada. Trump emphasized that his administration would not allow "one-sided, anti-competitive policies" from foreign governments to harm American businesses or national security. Trump is focused on reshaping US trade relationships, targeting digital services taxes to support major US tech companies and overhaul international tax systems. The memo highlights concern about taxes and regulations abroad that could hinder US companies' growth or threaten their intellectual property.

Trump pointed to digital service taxes in France and the UK ahead of meetings with their leaders. Trump signed another memorandum to encourage foreign investment from US allies while limiting investments from adversaries like China. The administration plans to streamline investment processes for friendly nations but will use the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States to restrict Chinese investments in critical sectors such as technology, infrastructure, healthcare, and energy.

The new rules aim to safeguard US farmland and real estate near military sites and strengthen oversight of foreign companies establishing new operations in the US. Further restrictions are also being considered for American investments in sensitive Chinese technology sectors, including semiconductors, AI, and biotechnology, to prevent contributions to China's military capabilities. He said, "We will adopt new rules to stop US companies from investing in China and block China from buying up America—ensuring that all investments serve American interests." ***—Agencies***

Donald Trump
PHOTO: PTI

Trump fires Joint Chiefs Chairman, 2 senior officers

WASHINGTON, 22 FEB

President Donald Trump dismissed Air Force General CQ Brown Jr from his role as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Brown, only the second Black officer to hold the position, had supported diversity initiatives in the military—a move perceived as a target in Trump's efforts against what he terms "wokeism". Trump announced he would nominate retired Air Force Lt Gen Dan "Razin" Caine as Brown's successor; however, Caine lacks certain key qualifications for the role. Alongside Brown's ousting, Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth terminated Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Lisa Franchetti and Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force General Jim Slife. Franchetti is the second top female officer dismissed during Trump's presidency. This has drawn criticism, with many viewing them as attempts to politicise military. The move follows speculation about leadership changes within the Pentagon and highlighted tensions over diversity and meritocracy in military ranks. ***—PTI***

AP sues three Trump officials over White House ban

WASHINGTON, 22 FEB

The Associated Press (AP) has filed a lawsuit against three officials from the Trump administration, challenging restrictions on its journalists' access to presidential events, citing violations of freedom of speech. The suit was lodged on Friday in US District Court in Washington, DC, shortly after the White House barred the agency from attending events, a move linked to AP's refusal to adopt President Trump's recent renaming of the Gulf of Mexico to the "Gulf of America."

The AP contends this action undermines the First Amendment, asserting that the government should not dictate media language or retaliate against editorial independence. White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt acknowledged the lawsuit but expressed confidence in their stance, emphasising the administration's commitment to truth.

Previous attempts by the AP to engage with the administration regarding these issues proved unsuccessful. The lawsuit notes concerns over the AP Stylebook's impact, which has been a focal point in the dispute, with the Trump administration criticising the AP's editorial decisions while other news organisations echo support for the agency's rights. ***—PTI***

TRUMP & NOSE PICKING DRAMA

US President Donald Trump has ordered the 150-year-old iconic Resolute Desk removed from the Oval Office for refurbishment, days after Elon Musk's son seemingly wiped a booger on it during their visit to the White House, according to media reports. According to the reports, Trump is known for his extreme germophobia. Trump has spoken openly about his phobia of germs in the past too.

Kash Patel announces major relocation of staff

Newly appointed FBI Director Kash Patel announced plans to relocate 1,000 employees from headquarters to field offices nationwide and transfer an additional 500 to a facility in Huntsville, Alabama. This initiative, conveyed during his swearing-in ceremony, aims to decentralise the FBI's operations. Patel took oath as the ninth director of the FBI on the Bhagavad Gita and spoke about how a first-generation Indian kid is living the American dream.

US proposes weaker UN resolution on Ukraine

The United States has tabled a draft UN resolution on the Ukraine war that diverges significantly from a competing European-backed statement calling for the immediate withdrawal of Russian forces. As the third anniversary of the invasion approaches, the US resolution expresses sorrow over the conflict's toll and seeks to encourage a swift peace, while critics label it insufficient. Tensions are rising within the transatlantic alliance.

Vance flays Germany's free speech laws at CPAC

WASHINGTON, 22 FEB

- Vance previously accused German authorities of "criminalising language," arguing this could strain European-American relations

US Vice President JD Vance has intensified his criticism of Germany's free speech laws, linking them to the American military presence in the country. Speaking at the Conservative Political Action Conference near Washington DC, he expressed concerns regarding the impact of Germany's hate speech laws on US service personnel.

"There are thousands upon thousands of American troops in Germany today. Do you think the American taxpayer is going to stand for that if you get thrown in jail in Germany for posting a mean tweet? Of course, they're not," Vance remarked, highlighting that the US military presence is subsidised by American taxpayers.

This follow a report by CBS examining Germany's approach to online hate speech, which included police confiscating devices from individuals. Vance previously accused German authorities of "criminalising language," arguing this could strain European-American relations.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz responded to Vance's assertions ahead of Sunday's federal elections, defending Germany's laws against hate speech. "I have nothing against people becoming billionaires, but not at the expense of the law," he stated, emphasising Europe's commitment to regulating extremist content, including a ban on Nazi symbols. German government spokesman Steffen Hebestreit expressed hope for more accurate media portrayals of Germany in the US. ***—DW News***

Hamas frees first 5 of 6 Israeli hostages

RAFAH, 22 FEB

Hamas freed the first five of six Israeli hostages due to be released Saturday even as heightened tension between the adversaries clouded the future of the fragile ceasefire deal.

The five were handed over to the Red Cross in two separate ceremonies in Gaza, brought out on stages by masked, armed Hamas fighters in front of hundreds of Palestinians.

In the central town of Nuseirat, three Israeli men in their 20s — Omer Wenkert, Omer Shem Tov, and Eliya Cohen — were posed alongside the fighters. A beaming Omer Shem Tov blew kisses to the crowd, flashed the thumbs up, and even kissed the militant next to him on the head.

Watching the release, Cohen's family and friends in Israel chanted "Eliya! Eliya! Eliya!" and cheered when they saw him for the first time. Shem Tov's grandmother ululated in joy, shrieking, "Omer, my joy! My life!" as she saw him.

The three were put in Red Cross vehicles that then headed for Israel. Earlier in the day, two other hostages were freed in the southern Gaza city of Rafah. A sixth hostage, 36-year-old Hisham al-Sayed, is also due to be released on Saturday. The latest release, to be followed by the freeing of hundreds of Palestinians imprisoned by Israel, is going ahead after tensions mounted over a grisly and heart-wrenching dispute triggered this week when Hamas initially handed over the wrong body for Shiri Bibas, an Israeli mother of two young boys abducted by militants. ***—PTI***

Israeli hostages Tal Shoham left, and Avera Mengisto are escorted by Hamas fighters before being handed over to the Red Cross in Rafa, southern Gaza Strip, on Saturday
PHOTO: PTI

Diddy's lead attorney quits days before trial

WASHINGTON DC 22 FEB

Anthony L Ricco, a well-known criminal defense lawyer from Harlem, New York, has stepped down from representing Sean 'Diddy' Combs in his upcoming sex trafficking and racketeering trial. Ricco, who has been practicing law since 1982, specialises in federal and state criminal defense.

In his withdrawal request, Ricco mentioned there were "sufficient reasons" for his decision, which are protected by attorney-client privilege. Ricco's exit comes amid growing troubles for Combs, who faces several allegations of sexual misconduct and abuse. Despite Ricco stepping down, Combs' defense team remains strong with other attorneys continuing to represent him. ***—Agencies***

TO FACE 25 YRS IN PRISON

Rushdie attacker convicted of attempted murder

NEW YORK, 22 FEB

Hadi Matar, the man who stabbed and partially blinded prize-winning novelist Salman Rushdie at an event in New York, has been found guilty of attempted murder.

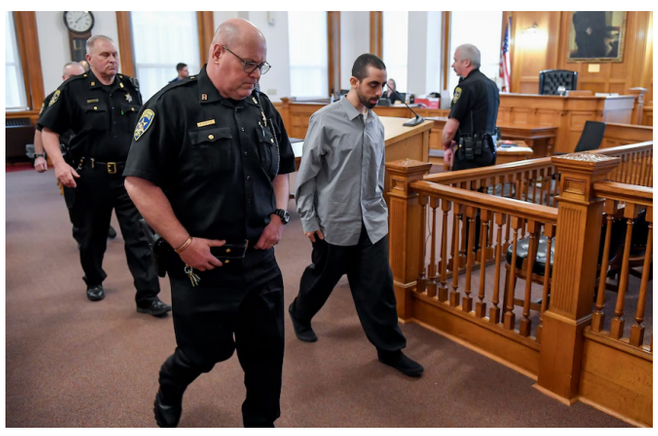
Jurors delivered the verdict on Friday for Matar's assault on Rushdie on stage at an arts institute's event in August 2022.

The Satanic Verses author, 77, was stabbed with a knife multiple times in the head, neck, torso and left hand, blinding his right eye and damaging his liver and intestines, and requiring emergency surgery and months of recovery.

Matar was found guilty of attempted murder in the second degree as well as assault in the second degree for stabbing Henry Reese, the co-founder of Pittsburgh's City of Asylum, a nonprofit group that helps exiled writers, who was conducting the talk with Rushdie that morning.

He will be sentenced on 23 April and faces up to 25 years in prison. New York-based British American Rushdie, an atheist born into a Muslim Kashmiri family in India, has faced death threats since the 1988 publication of his novel, The Satanic Verses, which Ayatollah Khomeini, then Iran's supreme leader, denounced as blasphemous.

After the knife assault, Matar said he assaulted Rushdie because he attacked Islam. Matar also faces federal charges brought by prosecutors, accusing him of attempting to murder Rushdie as an act of terrorism and of providing material support to Hezbollah in Lebanon, which the US designates as a terrorist organisation. Hezbollah had endorsed Khomeini's fatwa against Rushdie. ***—Agencies***



Hadi Matar is led out of court after the verdict in New York ***PHOTO: PTI***

UNSC calls for Rwandan troops to leave DR Congo

UNITED NATIONS, 22 FEB

In a unanimous resolution, the United Nations Security Council has condemned the advances of the M23 rebel group, which are allegedly supported by the Rwandan Defence Forces. The resolution urges Rwanda to withdraw its troops from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) "without preconditions".

Reports indicate that approximately 4,000 Rwandan soldiers are currently aiding M23 forces, which have gained control over significant areas in the eastern DRC, including the two largest cities in the region. The UN Security Council condemned the ongoing violence in North Kivu and South Kivu and called for an "immediate and unconditional ceasefire" from all parties involved.

PHOTO: X

The recent escalation in conflict has forcibly displaced over 50,000 Congolese, with many seeking refuge in Burundi, Uganda, and other neighbouring countries. The Congolese military's failure to effectively confront the M23 has raised concerns, with reports suggesting that most troops have retreated and only pro-Kinshasa militias are still engaged in combat.

The DRC accuses Rwanda of exploiting the situation to plunder its natural resources. ***—DW News***

Epigral targets 20% annual growth, eye double revenue

MUMBAI, 22 FEB

Specialty chemicals major Epigral Ltd aims to grow at an annual growth rate of 20 per cent and is poised to more than double its revenue by FY2028, a top company official said on Saturday. Sustained demand for derivative and specialty products as well as doubling of production capacity will act as key catalysts for the overall revenue growth, Epigral's Chairman and Managing Director, Maulik Patel said in a statement. The company's consolidated revenue for 2023-24 stood at Rs 1936 crore. *—PTI*

PHOTO:X

Jio Financial, Zomato to enter Nifty 50 from March

NEW DELHI, 22 FEB

Jio Financial Services Ltd and Zomato Ltd will enter the National Stock Exchange's benchmark Nifty 50 index from 28 March. As per the revisions, Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd. (BPCL) and Britannia Industries Ltd will be excluded from the index, according to a release from NSE Indices. The Index Maintenance Sub-Committee of NSE Indices Ltd has announced changes to the Nifty 50 index as part of its semi-annual review, effective from March 28, 2025. Zomato Jio Financial Services Ltd. have been added to the Nifty 50 index because their average free-float market capitalization over six months is at least 1.5 times that of the smallest companies being removed. Zomato's market cap is Rs 1,69,837 crore, while Jio Financial's is Rs 1,04,387 crore. *—PTI*

NSO releases Compendium of Datasets in India

NEW DELHI, 22 FEB

The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) has published the latest edition of the Compendium of Datasets and Registries in India, 2024, a key initiative aimed at strengthening data accessibility and informed decision-making, the Ministry said in a release on Saturday. This compilation, which is a component of the National Statistical System's continuous modernisation, guarantees that government data is readily available to academics, researchers, policymakers, students, analysts, businesses, and the general public, according to MoSPI. This comprehensive resource consolidates metadata for approximately 270 datasets and registries sourced from 40 ministries and departments of the Government of India, covering sectors such as agriculture, health, education, labour, rural development, tourism, social justice, banking, and more. The compendium is available for access on the official website of the ministry: www.mospi.gov.in.*—ANI*

Sharaf group to invest Rs 5,000 cr in Kerala

KOCHI, 22 FEB

In a move that will create more job opportunities in Kerala, UAE-based shipping and logistics giant Sharaf Group on Saturday announced an investment of Rs 5,000 crore in the state over the next five years. Sharaf Group Vice Chairman, His Excellency General Sharafuddin Sharaf, made the announcement at the Invest Kerala Global Summit here. Another factor, he said at a press conference during the summit, was the large pool of highly educated and capable human resources available in the state. Sharaf also said that not only in Kerala but in many other cities of India, the ease of doing business was simple, the company received a lot of support, and "things were getting done much faster." *—PTI*

FPIs sold equities worth Rs 1 lakh cr in 2 months

FPIs withdrew Rs 78,027 crore in January from stock mkts

MUMBAI, 22 FEB

Foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) have sold equities worth over Rs 1 lakh crore from Indian markets in less than two months of 2025, according to data released by the National Securities Depository Limited (NSDL).

The total outflow by FPIs so far this year stands at Rs 1,01,737 crore.

In this week, from 17 February to 21 February, FPIs sold equities worth Rs 2,437.04 crore. This marks a significant drop in selling intensity compared to the previous week, when foreign investors offloaded equities worth Rs 13,930.48 crore. The slowdown in selling is attributed to bulk deal investments in Bharti Airtel shares, which helped ease the outflow pressure.

For February alone, FPIs have sold equities worth Rs 23,710 crore. The persistent selling trend by foreign investors suggests concerns over the Indian market conditions, domestic economic factors, and interest rate trends.

In January the FPIs withdrew Rs 78,027 crore from the Indian stock market. Last year in December the net investment by FPIs in Indian equities stood positive, with a net investment of Rs 15,446 crore.

This persistent selling is largely attributed to the return of Donald Trump to the political stage in the United States, which has boosted investor confidence in the US economy. The positive sentiment surrounding Trump's leadership and his efforts to improve the average American's life have made the US a more attractive destination for investments.

Outflows from emerging markets, including India, have been rising as investors shift towards safer assets.The country experienced a drastic drop in Foreign Portfolio Investment (FPI) inflows in 2024, with net investments falling by 99 per cent compared to previous year. *—ANI*

For February alone, FPIs have sold equities worth Rs 23,710 crore ***PHOTO: X***

- In this week, from 17 February to 21 February, FPIs sold equities worth Rs 2,437.04 crore. This marks a significant drop in selling intensity compared to previous week

FROM 5.4%

India's GDP likely to improve to 6.2%: Union Bank

NEW DELHI, 22 FEB

India's economic growth is expected to pick up momentum in the third quarter of the financial year 2024-25 (Q3FY25), with GDP growth estimated at 6.2 per cent, up from 5.4 per cent in the second quarter (Q2FY25), according to a report by Union Bank of India.

The report highlighted that the negative gap between GDP and Gross Value Added (GVA) growth, which was observed in the first half of FY25 (H1-FY25), is likely to have neutralized in Q3FY25.

It said "We estimate Q3FY25 GDP growth rate to mark an uptick to 6.2 per cent (5.4 per cent in Q2FY25), as the negative gap between GDP and GVA growth observed in H1-FY25 probably became neutral in Q3FY25"

However, the report also pointed to a disconnect between the growth trends in net indirect taxes reflected in GDP data and fiscal data. It warned that the decline in net indirect taxes growth in fiscal data this quarter could pose a risk of continued negative GDP-GVA growth gap in Q3FY25 as well.

In addition to the Q3FY25 GDP data, the government will also release the second advance estimate for the full-year GDP of FY25.

The report has kept its full-year GDP growth forecast unchanged at 6.4 per cent, which would require economic growth of around 6.8 per cent in the second half (H2) of the fiscal year, compared to 6 per cent in H1FY25.

The upcoming GDP data release will provide a clearer picture of the country's economic performance and help assess whether the growth momentum continues in the second half of FY25. *—ANI*

Consumption, finance stocks lead Nifty 50: Report

NEW DELHI, 22 FEB

The consumption and financial services stocks leading in inclusions in Nifty 50 index over the last seven years, while industrial & capex and defensive sector stocks were the most excluded, highlights a report by ICICI Securities.

The report stated that from March 2018 to March 2025, the sectoral distribution of stock exclusions and inclusions in the Nifty 50 index has shown significant shifts.

The report said "Since 2018, new-age stocks related to areas such as insurance, fintech, organised retail along with consumer and healthcare companies have enteredNIFTY50 at the cost of old economy stocks from sectors such as oil & gas, industrials and traditional lenders"

The report added that industrials and capex stocks accounted for 47 per cent of the exclusions, followed by defensive sectors at 29 per cent, consumption at 12 per cent, financial services at 6 per cent, and private banks at 6 per cent.

One of the most striking aspects of this shift is the divergence in the price-to-earnings (P/E) ratio of incoming and outgoing stocks.

The evolving composition of the Nifty 50 suggests a broader market preference for high-growth sectors over traditional industries.

Meanwhile, industrial and defensive stocks have lost ground, reflecting changing economic and market dynamics. *—ANI*

PHOTO:FREEPIK

Oswal: Mkts to remain in consolidation phase

NEW DELHI, 22 FEB

Indian stock markets will remain in the 'corrective to consolidation' phase for the next 3 to 4 months, according to a report by Motilal Oswal Wealth Limited.

The corrective phase refers to a period when stock prices decline or pull back after a strong rally, which happens when investors book profits or due to external economic factors.

On the other hand, the consolidation phase means the market is moving sideways, with prices fluctuating within a certain range but not making significant gains or losses.

In its analysis of the current situation of the equity markets, the report sheds light on the impact of the macroeconomic trends and policy decisions that affect the markets.

Japan, another major economy and an important carry trade participant, seems to be also on the path to higher rates after a period of ultra-loose monetary policy for more than 15 years, the report added. *—ANI*

PHOTO:X

Amfi launches 3 initiatives to boost MF recovery

NEW DELHI, 22 FEB

Industry body Amfi has launched three initiatives -- SIP for smaller investments, Tarun Yojana to encourage young investors, and MITRA to help track and recover forgotten investments.

These initiatives align with markets regulator Sebi and Association of Mutual Funds in India's ongoing efforts to democratise mutual fund investments, ensuring wider participation across diverse segments of society.

A Rs 250 systematic investment plan (SIP) is a sachetisation of mutual fund (MF) designed to make MF investing more accessible, especially for first-time investors and those from underserved segments.

The Tarun Yojana seeks to integrate financial literacy into school curricula, equipping young minds.

Meanwhile, the MITRA (Mutual Fund Investment Tracing and Retrieval Assistant) platform addresses a long-standing challenge by enabling investors and their legal heirs to identify and recover inactive or forgotten MF holdings, ensuring rightful asset ownership.

The country's MF industry has witnessed robust growth, with assets under management (AUM) surpassing Rs 65 lakh crore, reflecting increasing retail participation and a growing preference for systematic, long-term investing. *—PTI*

The major players in India's quick commerce segment are Zomato, Big Basket, Zepto, Blinkit, and Swiggy Instamart ***PHOTO: FREEPIK***

India's Quick Commerce to grow 75-100%: Bernstein

NEW DELHI, 22 FEB

The Quick commerce in India is set to grow at an impressive rate of 75-100 per cent year-on-year, significantly outpacing traditional retail, which is expected to grow at a much lower rate, says a report by Bernstein

The report attributes this growth to quick commerce's advantages in proximity, pricing, and product selection.

It said "Quick commerce is uniquely positioned across Proximity, Pricing & Selection & will continue to grow at 75-100 per cent YoY vs retail at low teens".

The report indicated that quick commerce is advancing faster than other internet-based retail channels in India. By 2025, the sector is expected to further establish itself as a dominant force.

The top 40-50 cities in India collectively account for a grocery market worth around USD 250 billion, and quick commerce is well-positioned to capture a substantial share of this market.

The major players in India's quick commerce segment are Zomato, Big Basket, Zepto, Blinkit, and Swiggy Instamart. Traditional e-commerce giants like Amazon and Flipkart are also entering the quick commerce business through their platforms. *—ANI*

Power minister seeks innovative manufacturing growth solutions

NEW DELHI, 22 FEB

Union Power Minister Manohar Lal on Saturday urged industry stakeholders to work on manufacturing innovative solutions to strengthen India's journey towards Viksit Bharat.

India's ambitious target of 500 GW of renewable energy target by 2030 provides various opportunities, the minister said, while addressing the Elecrama 2025 event organised by industry body IEEMA in Greater Noida.

Manohar Lal ***PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA***

The power sector is playing an important role in the country's journey towards becoming Viksit Bharat, the minister said, adding that industry stakeholders must work to make the sector a growth engine for India.

Lal further noted that the sector makes a significant contribution to the country's economy, and said the government is working to enhance its share.

Since 2014, India has scaled up its RE capacity 2.81 times to 200 GW. Solar capacity has alone grown 38 times to cross 100 GW. This is not just statistics but proof that India is not progressing but racing ahead, Lal added. *—PTI*

'Govt plans scheme to prevent farmers' distress sale'

NEW DELHI, 22 FEB

Union Agriculture Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan on Saturday said the government is working out measures to ensure that farmers do not have to sell their produces, especially fruits and vegetables, at throwaway prices.

Speaking after inaugurating the 'Pusa Krishi Vigyan Mela' 2025 -- being held in the national capital from 22-24 February-- he emphasised the need to take new seeds varieties and farm technologies from labs to agriculture filed at the earliest.

Chouhan said the government is holding discussions with farmers directly as well as through their organisations to understand the problems and then making schemes to address the issues.

Chouhan said the government has removed exports restrictions on rice and onions while raising import duties on edible oils. He said the Centre has taken steps to help tomato farmers in view of price crash and will take measures for red chilli farmers of Andhra Pradesh as well.

Lauding efforts of scientists at Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) for its efforts in making India self-sufficient in foodgrains production, Chouhan said there is a need to take new seed varieties and technology to the field quickly so that farmers can benefit. He said under PM-KISAN scheme, Rs 6,000 is being provided to 9.8 crore farmers. *—PTI*

Shivraj Singh Chouhan ***PHOTO: PTI***

COPYRIGHTED WORKS

Meta faces scrutiny over AI training

CALIFORNIA, 22 FEB

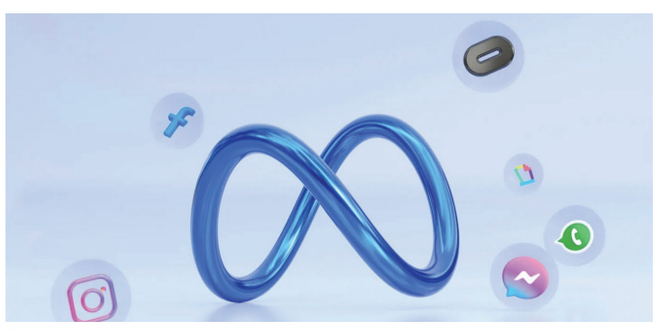
Meta is facing allegations of using copyrighted materials for training its AI models without proper licensing, according to court documents revealed in the case Kadrey v. Meta. The lawsuit, involving authors like Sarah Silverman and Ta-Nehisi Coates, challenges Meta's claim that using copyrighted content for AI training constitutes "fair use."

The documents, containing internal Meta chats, suggest the company knowingly considered legally questionable methods for acquiring training data. In one chat, Meta research engineer Xavier Martinet suggested buying e-books at retail prices rather than negotiating licensing deals, arguing it was faster and that other start-ups were already using pirated content.

The discussions also revealed that Meta considered using Libgen, a controversial platform known for offering unauthorized access to copyrighted books. Despite its legal issues, Meta executives allegedly viewed Libgen as vital for maintaining competitiveness in AI development.

Meta's AI team also discussed tuning models to avoid "IP risky prompts" and explored scraping data from platforms like Reddit. In a March 2024 chat, Meta's AI leadership debated reversing earlier restrictions on using specific data sources to expand training datasets, citing the need for more diverse input.

The lawsuit claims Meta cross-referenced pirated books with licensed ones to determine potential licensing deals. Meta has added two Supreme Court litigators from Paul Weiss to its legal defence, indicating the case's high stakes. Meta has yet to comment on the allegations. *—Agencies*



The lawsuit claims Meta cross-referenced pirated books with licensed ones to determine potential licensing deals ***PHOTO: X***

- The discussions also revealed that Meta considered using Libgen, a controversial platform known for offering unauthorised access to copyrighted books

SEBI slaps Rs 10 lakh penalty on Axis Securities

NEW DELHI, 22 FEB

Capital markets regulator SEBI has imposed a penalty of Rs 10 lakh on Axis Securities for flouting stock brokers rules as well as other regulatory norms.

The penalty has to be paid by the brokerage firm within 45 days, the regulator said in an order on Friday.

In an 82-page order, SEBI found that Axis Securities failed to follow regulatory procedures in several areas, including reporting discrepancies and improper handling of client funds.

The market regulator found that Axis Securities had inconsistencies in its enhanced supervision reporting to stock exchanges and in stock statements compared to actual holdings in depository accounts.

The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) also observed that Axis Securities also did not settle clients' funds and securities as per preference obtained from the clients and also failed to provide retention statements with account details.

Additionally, the brokerage firm passed on penalties imposed by stock exchanges on it for short collection of upfront/non upfront margin to its clients, SEBI said.

The order came after SEBI had undertaken inspection of Axis Securities for the period from April 2021 to November 2022.

The markets watchdog noted that the brokerage firm had transferred securities of clients with credit balances to a "client unpaid securities account" and did not properly address customer grievances. *—ANI*

Rahul Dravid teams up with son Anvay

BENGALURU, 22 FEB

Former India captain and coach Rahul Dravid on Saturday padded up with his son Anvay to play for Vijaya Cricket Club (Malur) in a Third Division (Group I) match for the Nassur Memorial Shield. Dravid senior, who came to bat at No 6, made 10 off eight balls with a boundary but Anvay scored 58 off 60 balls with eight fours as Vijaya amassed 345 for seven against Young Lions Club. Swapnil was the top run-getter for the club with a 50-ball 107 with 12 fours and four sixes. Anvay is a wicketkeeper-batter, while Samit, the elder son of Dravid, is a pace-bowling all-rounder.—*PTI*

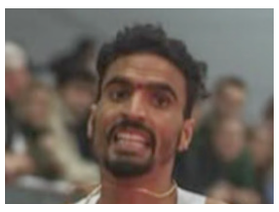


PHOTO: X

Gulveer qualifies for World C'ships in 5000m

NEW DELHI, 22 FEB

India's Asian Games bronze medallist Gulveer Singh smashed the Asian Indoor 5000m record while also qualifying for the World Athletics Championships to be held later this year when he finished fourth in an indoor event in Boston, USA. Gulveer clocked 12 minutes and 59.77 seconds to finish fourth at the Terrier DMR Challenge indoor competition in Boston on Friday and become the first Indian to run 5000m in sub 13 minutes.His performance on the Boston University track eclipsed the earlier Asian indoor 5000m record of 13:08.41s set by Thailand's Kieran Tuntivate in 2022. The entry standard for the 2025 World Championships (September 13 to 21) in Tokyo is 13.01.00.—*PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Manu Bhaker to lead 35-member shooting team

NEW DELHI, 22 FEB

Ace pistol shooter Manu Bhaker will lead a 35-member Indian team in the season-opening ISSF World Cups in April in South America with almost all the shooters who featured in the Paris Olympics cutting.A notable member of the team is air pistol ace Saurabh Chaudhary, who returns to the national side after more than three years. Saurabh, who battled a shoulder injury and poor form following the Tokyo Olympics in 2021, recently shot a national record score in the 10m air pistol qualification besides impressing in the trials.He had paired with Manu in the 10m air pistol mixed team event in Tokyo.—*PTI*

Ahlawat cuts with a birdie while Shubhankar misses

NAIROBI, 22 FEB

Veer Ahlawat's rounds of 70-72 gave him an even-par total, allowing him to make a last-minute cut at the Magical Kenya Open here. Ahlawat started his second round very early and then had to wait for the rest of the afternoon to know whether he had cut. The 28-year-old rookie, who shot a 1-under 71 in the first round after a disappointing finish with three bogeys in his last four holes, was staring at a missed cut when he came to the 17th tee in the second round. Meanwhile, fellow Indian Shubhankar Sharma, endured another tough week as he carded 71-72 and missed the cut by one.Ahlawat, who was runner-up at the Hero Indian Open last year, bogeyed the second and the seventh and got his first birdie on the eighth.—*PTI*

Australia chases highest total ever in ICC Champions Trophy

Ben Duckett stands tall with a career-best 165

LAHORE, 22 FEB

Australia rode on Josh Inglis' unbeaten century to beat England by five wickets to record the highest successful chase ever in any ICC 50-overs event, during their Champions Trophy match here on Saturday.

Inglis remained not out on 120 off just 86 balls from which he hit eight fours and six sixes as Australia chased down the target of 352 with 15 balls to spare. Opener Matthew Short and Alex Carey contributed 63 and 69 respectively while Marnus Labuschagne made 47 as Australia reached 356 for 5 in 47.3 overs.

Earlier, a magnificent 165 from opening batter Ben Duckett powered England to 351 for 8.

Duckett's 143-ball commanding innings was studded with 17 fours and three sixes, while Joe Root contributed 68 after England were asked to bat first.

Josh Inglis 120 not out

For Australia, Ben Dwarshuis took three wickets for 66 runs while Adam Zampa and Marnus Labuschagne chipped in with two each.

Brief Scores:

England: 351 for 8 in 50 overs (Ben Duckett 165, Joe Root 68; Ben Dwarshuis 3/66, Adam Zampa 2/64, Marnus Labuschagne 2/41).

Australia: 356 for 5 in 47.3 overs (Josh Inglis 120 not out, Liam Livingstone 1/47). —*PTI*

PCB enforces no-free-pass policy

For the first time, the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) is not distributing free passes for enclosures, VIP areas, or hospitality boxes during the ongoing ICC Champions Trophy, a departure from past practices for international series in Pakistan. Typically whenever an international series is held in Pakistan, the PCB reserves tickets to be given out as free passes to some stakeholders including the media, government departments, VIPs, and sponsors.

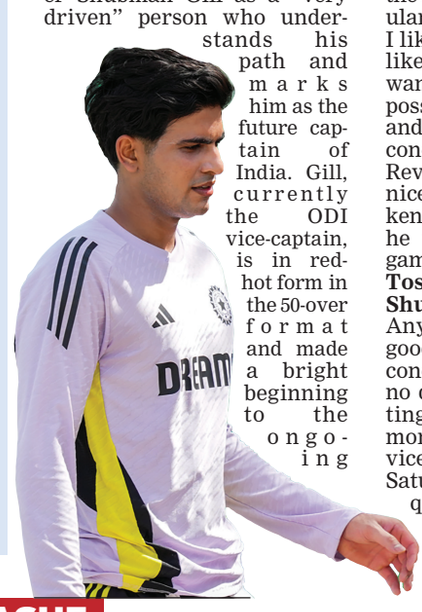
Pant misses training session

Wicketkeeper-batter Rishabh Pant missed India's training session with viral fever, informed vice-captain Shubman Gill, on Saturday. India are due to play Pakistan in the Champions Trophy in Dubai on Sunday.The illness-induced absence is unlikely to hurt India's playing XI against arch-rivals Pakistan. There were suggestions that Rahul would be preferred over Pant. —*PTI*

Gill is very driven, wants to be best in leadership: Ponting

DUBAI, 22 FEB

Legendary Australian cricketer Ricky Ponting termed opener Shubman Gill as a "very driven" person who understands his path and marks him as the future captain of India. Gill, currently the ODI vice-captain, is in red-hot form in the 50-over format and made a bright beginning to the ongoing Champions Trophy with a hundred in India's six-wicket win over Bangladesh. "We've had a chance to catch up over the last couple of years, particularly around the IPL season. I like his demeanor. He seems like a very driven guy who wants to be the best that he possibly can be with batting and also as far as leadership's concerned," Ponting told ICC Review. "He just seems like a nice character. A softly spoken guy, very driven for what he wants to achieve in the game," Ponting said.



Toss won't be a factor Shubman Gill

Anything over 300 is a "very good" total considering the conditions in Dubai and with no dew around, the team batting second will be under more pressure, said India vice-captain Shubman Gill on Saturday ahead of the marquee clash against arch-rivals Pak in the Champions Trophy. —*PTI*

I eat only one meal a day: Shami

DUBAI, 22 FEB

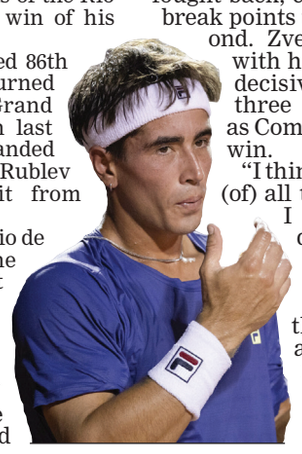
Giving an insight into how he keeps match-fit even at age 34, Indian bowling stalwart Mohammed Shami says he prefers to eat only one meal a day and has never had a craving for delicacies. "After 2015, I only have one meal a day. I only have dinner; no breakfast, no lunch. It is tough to do such a thing but once you get used to it then it becomes very easy," said Shami in an interaction with cricketer-turned-commentator Navjot Singh Sidhu on Star Sports. Shami has been the standout bowler for India in the ongoing Champions Trophy. —*PTI*

Rio Open: Comesana stuns Zverev in quarters

NEW DELHI, 22 FEB

Argentinian Francisco Comesana stunned Australian Open finalist and world number two Alexander Zverev on Friday with a 4-6, 6-3, 6-4 win in the quarterfinals of the Rio Open, the biggest win of his career so far.

Comesana, ranked 86th in the world, turned heads in his Grand Slam debut match last year when he handed sixth seed Andrey Rublev a first-round exit from Wimbledon.



Friday's win in Rio de Janeiro is the 24-year-old's first victory over a top-five-ranked opponent.

"I was repeating to myself throughout the match, 'How good it is to be alive,'" Comesana said in his post-match interview. "So, I was enjoying the entire match."

Germany's Zverev landed three aces as he won the first set, but Comesana fought back, converting two break points to win the second. Zverev struggled with his serve in the decisive set, making three double faults as Comesana took the win.

"I think it is because (of) all the hard work I have been doing to be here.

I have to be grateful for this moment, and I am enjoying (it)," Comesana said. —*PTI*

WOMEN'S FIH PRO LEAGUE

Deepika's goal hands India a 1-0 win over Germany

BHUBANESWAR, 22 FEB

Star drag-flicker Deepika scored the all-important goal from a set piece to hand India a crucial 1-0 victory over Germany in a return-leg women's FIH Pro League match here on Saturday.

Deepika sounded the board with a thunderous flick from a penalty corner in the 12th minute, which proved to be decisive. The win came after India's 0-4 loss against the same opponents here on Friday.India will next play the Netherlands here on February 24. After suffering a heavy defeat on Friday, the Indian women did turn the tables around with a gritty performance.

India's crucial 1-0 victory over Germany PHOTO: HOCKEY INDIA

The Indians started on a bright note and pressed hard on the German defense from the onset.Soon after the start, skipper Salima Tete took a snap shot after good work from Sunelita Toppo down the left but it didn't bother Finja Starck one bit in the German goal.India was by far the more attacking side on display and took the lead in the 12th minute through their first penalty corner, created by Neha with her brilliant dribbling skills. —*PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

NIZAR'S HELMET BRINGS FOCUS ON HEADGEAR

NEW DELHI, 22 FEB

A ricocheted shot off Salman Nizar's helmet nestled in the hands of Sachin Baby ensured Kerala a maiden Ranji Trophy final berth, but that moment of fortune has also placed the spotlight on this life-saving but often under-noticed cricket equipment.

This newfound focus on helmets has two layers safety and cricketing laws.

The sturdiness of the headgear saved Nizar's life after Gujarat's Arzan Nagwaswalla's full-blooded shot hit flush on the state emblem on his helmet.

Still, Nizar had to be carried to the hospital for scans and the positive results left the Kerala players a relieved lot.

For a moment, the whole train of events also dragged everybody's mind back to the tragic end of Australia's Phillip Hughes. He died after being hit by a Sean Abbott bouncer during a domestic match, his helmet failing to protect the neck area which was fatally struck in 2014.

Hughes' shocking demise had sparked a change in the rules. The powers that be converged to study the quality of helmets in use.

Post extensive research, cricket law-makers Marylebone Cricket Club, under the supervision of top brains like Kumar Sangakkara and Sourav Ganguly, decided to standardize the quality of helmets used by batters, wicketkeepers while standing up to the stumps and close-in fielders such as forward short leg or silly point. —*PTI*

India's Jeevan-Prashant crowned doubles Champion in Maha Open

MUMBAI, 22 FEB

The top-seeded Indian men's doubles duo, Jeevan Nedunchezhiyan, and Vijay Sundar Prasanth, came from behind to clinch the ATP Challenger 100 title at the Shree Shiv Chhatrapati Sports Complex in Pune on Saturday.

They overcame the challenge of the second-seeded Australian pair, Blake Bayldon and Matthew Romios, with a 3-6, 6-3, 10-0 victory to be crowned champions in front of the home crowd.

This was Jeevan's third career title, while it was the second for the duo as a pair, following their Hangzhou Open triumph late last year.

PHOTO: PTI

The Indian pair had a slow start to the final, conceding the opening set 3-6 after suffering a late break in the eighth game, which gave the Aussie duo a significant advantage.

However, they mounted a strong comeback in the second set, applying intense pressure and earning four break points against Bayldon and Romios, which they eventually converted to force a super tiebreak. —*PTI*

East Bengal FC beat Punjab FC 3-1 in ISL

NEW DELHI, 22 FEB

East Bengal maintained their newfound form with a 3-1 thumping of Punjab FC in their Indian Super League (ISL) match here on Saturday.

Dimitrios Diamantakos (15th minute) set the tone for the visitors with an early strike before Naorem Mahesh Singh (47th) and Lalchungnunga (54th) found the back of the net.

Later, Punjab FC scored the consolation goal in the 62nd minute, courtesy of a fantastic strike from Ezequiel Vidal.

East Bengal are now unbeaten in their last three away games this campaign as they kept their hopes for playoffs alive albeit mathematically.

They are 10th in the table with 24 points from 21 games now, whereas Punjab FC has dropped to 11th place.

With three games left to play, both East Bengal and Punjab FC are eight points behind the sixth-placed Mumbai City.

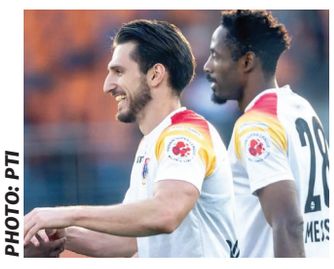


PHOTO: PTI

East Bengal made some promising moves from the left flank to start the game, while Punjab FC's backline was alert to the danger in the early exchanges.

The Red and Gold brigade took the lead when their Greek forward hammered a shot on goal from the left, more in hope than conviction but it went through Ravi Kumar's legs into the goal. —*PTI*

PREMIER LEAGUE

Mbeumo stars as Brentford win 4-0

LEICESTER, 22 FEB

Brentford hammered Leicester City 4-0 and set a club record of four consecutive away wins in the Premier League.

Thomas Frank's men were all over Leicester and were 3-0 up before halftime.

Yoane Wissa took Mikkel Damsgaard's exquisite flick and bundled the ball in from close range after 17 minutes.

Ten minutes later, Bryan Mbuemo cut in from the right and crashed in a curling shot.

Then skipper Christian Norgaard's deft header sealed the match as a contest with 33 minutes gone.

The abject first half could have been worse for Leicester, which saw Kristoffer Ajer's shot rebound off the post just before halftime and a Keane Lewis-Potter score disallowed for handball.

The introduction of Facundo Buonanotte with almost an hour gone gave the home side a lift but it was too late for a club that remained second from bottom on the table and without a goal at King Power Stadium since Dec. 8.

Fábio Carvalho rounded off the scoring for Brentford near time.

It was the first time Brentford had scored three goals in the first half of an away match in the Premier League and Damsgaard said the challenge now was to match its away form with wins at home. The London club has picked up just one point from a possible 15 at home since 21 Dec. —*PTI*

Everton,United secure 2-2 draw

Manchester United came back from the dead to secure a 2-2 draw with Everton at Goodison Park after what was a tense Premier League encounter.While United trailed for the majority of the encounter, a moment of magic from skipper Bruno Fernandes provided his team with the inspiration they needed to launch a nailbiting comeback. —*PTI*

Aspas' 2nd penalty in a week gives Celta 1–0 win

MADRID, 22 FEB

Iago Aspas scored his second penalty in a week as Celta Vigo beat Osasuna 1-0 at home and rose five places in La Liga on Friday.

There was not a lot between the teams but the 68th-minute goal from Celta's talismanic forward continued the club's fine home form. Four minutes after coming on as a substitute he dispatched his penalty.

Celta has lost just three of its 14 home games since August. Only Atletico Madrid and Real Madrid have won more times at home this season.

The victory lifted it above Osasuna and into ninth place. Both clubs have 32 points but have played a game more than the teams around them.

"The mistake cost us the penalty," Osasuna midfielder Jon Moncayola said. "We're conceding goals in every game and if we want to start looking to go up the table then we have to concede fewer." —*PTI*